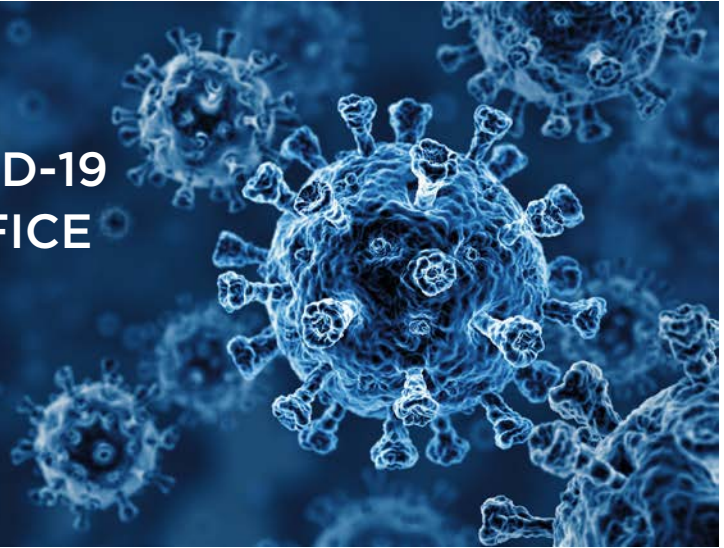




# HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDANCE DURING COVID-19 FOR EMPLOYERS OF OFFICE SETTINGS



## OVERVIEW

This is not a legal document and employers are advised to seek legal advice.

Employers have obligations to protect workers from hazards in the workplace as set out in the [Occupational Health and Safety Act \(OHSa\)](#) and its regulations as well as the directives coming from the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

Workers should raise any concerns to their:

- Supervisor
- Joint Health and safety Committee
- Health and Safety Representative

This will help ensure the employer has taken all reasonable precautions.

Ontario is currently in the midst of a [global pandemic](#). While the COVID-19 situation is changing daily, **the legislation and regulations used to govern Ontario's workplaces remain in force.**

Under Ontario law, employers have the duty to take every reasonable precaution to protect workers from hazards in the workplace. Hazards in the workplace should be controlled. Workers have the [right to refuse unsafe work](#). If health and safety concerns are not resolved internally, a worker can seek enforcement by filing a complaint with the Ministry's Health and Safety Contact Centre at 1-877-202-0008. Failure of the employer to comply with the OHSa and its regulations could result in a [stop-work order](#) upon inspection by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.



## BEST PRACTICES TO KEEP YOUR WORKERS HEALTHY AND SAFE

The health and safety of workers is a top concern amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. During this time all stakeholders must place an increased focus on health and safety in order to keep Office services open and safe.

All measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 should be done in compliance with requirements under the Occupational Health and Safety Act and associated Regulations and public health directives issued by the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

In addition, below are a set of resources, tips and best practices to help employers prevent the spread of COVID-19.

### PROTECTING YOURSELF AND CO-WORKERS

Coronaviruses are spread through close contact, including at work. Here are some [helpful tips](#) to prevent the spread of infection:

- Wash your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Sneeze and cough into your sleeve.
- If you use a tissue, discard immediately and wash your hands afterward.
- Avoid touching your face, eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home if you are sick.
- Avoid high-touch areas, where possible, or ensure you clean your hands after.
- Where possible, wear gloves when interacting with high-touch areas. Do not touch your face with gloved hands. Put on and remove gloves in a manner that avoids contamination of the hands. Ensure you wash your hands after removing gloves.
- Wash your clothes as soon as you get home.
- If you are ill: notify your supervisor immediately, complete the [self-assessment](#) and follow the instructions you get.

### REPORTING ILLNESS

The symptoms of COVID-19 can resemble a cold or a flu. At this time, it is recommended that any worker who is experiencing any symptoms related to cold, flu or COVID-19 should be sent home. The MLTSD is focused on providing enhanced protections for workers. Effective March 19, 2020, the Employment Standards Act, 2020, was amended to provide [job-protected leave](#) for employees affected by COVID-19



According to Health Canada, symptoms can appear in as little as a few days, or as long as 14 days after being exposed to someone with the disease. COVID-19 can cause a range of symptoms including fever, cough, sore throat and shortness of breath.

For some people, the symptoms are like having a cold; for others they are quite severe or even life-threatening. It is important to check with your healthcare provider and follow instructions about staying home or away from public spaces to prevent the spread of the virus.

The virus typically spreads through coughing and sneezing, personal contact with an infected person, or touching an infected surface and then the mouth, nose, or eyes.

Close contact with a potentially infected person or touching potentially contaminated items (such as desks, keyboards, counters, door handles, hard surfaces, elevator buttons, etc.) are likely to pose the greatest exposure risks. Also, close contact with other people increases the risk of exposure to someone who may be infected.

In addition, employers should advise these workers to immediately [self-isolate](#) and complete the online self-assessment or call either:

- Telehealth: 1-866-797-0000
- their primary care provider (for example, family physician)

Asymptomatic workers who have travelled outside of Canada within the last 14 days and/or have had potential unprotected exposure to a person with COVID-19, and have been identified as [Critical to Continued Operations](#); need to self-isolate when they are not at work. This work isolation requirement also applies to staff who have tested positive but symptoms have resolved.

## MINISTRY OF LABOUR, TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND WORKPLACE SAFETY & INSURANCE BOARD REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

The symptoms of COVID-19 are shared with many other illnesses including the cold and flus. At this time, it is recommended that any worker who is experiencing any symptoms should be sent home. If you have a worker who is experiencing symptoms:

- Advise the worker to complete the self-assessment on the Ontario COVID website. The worker will be told what to do next based on the self-assessment results
- The worker can also call Telehealth ([1-866-797-0000](http://1-866-797-0000)), their local Public Health unit, or their family doctor
- The employer must report illnesses acquired at work, including COVID-19, to:
  - the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (in writing) within four (4) days
  - the joint health and safety representative
  - the trade union (if applicable)



For more information:

- [Occupational Illness: Requirements to Report to the Ministry of Labour](#)
- [Occupational Illness: Infectious Disease Reporting Form](#)

Workplaces that provide Office services, can refer to Section 5 (2) of the [Industrial Establishments Reg. 851](#) to understand what information should be included in the report. Employers must also report occupationally-acquired illnesses (e.g. COVID-19) to the [WSIB](#) within 72 hours of receiving notification of the illness.

## ESTABLISH AN EFFECTIVE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY AND INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL PLAN

Establish an infectious disease preparedness and response plan. The plan should follow recommendations from the [Ministry of Health](#) and directives from [Public Health Ontario](#). The plan should consider and address levels of risk associated with the workplace and job tasks related to the Office environment. This includes how the organization will operate during a pandemic, including sanitization protocols, equipment and resources, how employees report illness, how to ensure physical distancing and how work will be scheduled.

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*To access all Ministry of Health guidance notes please visit the website below and scroll down to find sector specific information:*

[http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/2019\\_guidance.aspx](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/2019_guidance.aspx)

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A list of activities and links to relevant resources:

- Maintain physical distancing. Physical distancing generally means maintaining a distance of at least 2 metres (6 feet) or more between persons. By maintaining physical distance you are less likely to be exposed to the respiratory virus. There should be a clear understanding of how the workplace productivity may be impacted.
- Establish a system for active screening to be conducted before appointments are scheduled. Have passive screening by positing signage at points of entry to inform people about specific protocols.
- Discourage sharing of telephones, keyboards, desks or workstations.
- Consider the total number of workers in the workplace and have staff work remotely as much as possible. Restrict access to building to only essential personnel.
- Implement administrative controls such as proper training for staff regarding screening clients and written infection prevention and control protocols, as well as changing work schedules and breaks.
- Development of systems to conduct work away from the office e.g. from their home; using email, telephone, video-conferencing etc.
- If direct client contact is essential and cannot be avoided, then staff should consider using personal protective equipment: e.g. having staff and/or client wear surgical mask.
- Conduct RACE (Recognize, Assess, Control and Evaluate) analysis to determine any additional controls that may be applicable. Here is a RACE tool: [Risk assessment and job hazard analysis](#)



- Implement sick leave policies and [coverage](#) for workers who may be self-isolating or are unwell by accessing extra staff or volunteers.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CLEANING AND DISINFECTION

Keeping the workplace clean and sanitized is vital. It is critical to follow thorough and regular cleaning and disinfecting practices in all Office workplaces. These practices become particularly essential during a pandemic that involves an infectious agent.

All employers should increase the sanitization of the workplace. Areas of focus should include:

- Easy access to soap and water (or other ways to properly sanitize hands)
- Encouraging staff to frequently wash their hands with soap and water (for a minimum of 20 seconds) or alcohol-based (greater than 60% alcohol) hand sanitizer
- Increased cleaning and sanitization of commonly touched surfaces, areas or items (e.g. door handles, railings, tables, work surfaces, equipment e.g. computer keyboards and mice).

Health Canada recommends the following basic hygiene practices:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- If using hand sanitizers, they must be alcohol based (with greater than 60% alcohol) to be effective
- Avoid touching your face
- Sneeze or cough into a tissue and discard it
- Use a clean tissue or your knuckle/elbow to touch light switches, doors, buttons, etc.

## SHARE INFORMATION

It is important that all parties in a workplace understand their roles and responsibilities. Employers will need to ensure health and safety policies are updated and posted for all employees to have access to. Using industry resources, including this one and those produced by [Public Services Health and Safety Association](#) (PSHSA) will improve awareness in the workplace and provide guidance for employers.

## POST YOUR POLICIES

All employers need to post and communicate COVID-19 policies to employees. These policies should cover how the organization will operate, including but not limited to:

- Sanitization of sites and equipment
- How employees report illnesses
- How to ensure physical distancing
- How work will be scheduled

## PHYSICAL DISTANCING

As advised by the Chief Medical Officer of Health, public health officials, and outlined throughout government communications; physical distancing is required to control the spread of COVID-19.



In order to ensure [physical distancing](#) in the workplace, employers should consider:

- Where staff are assigned to work to optimize physical distancing
- If direct client contact is essential and cannot be avoided, then instruct the client to maintain at least 2 metres (6 feet) distance from the staff member whenever possible
- Consider implementing a system for virtual and/or telephone/video consultations when and where possible
- Postpone non-essential face-to-face appointments or convert to virtual/video appointments
- Having staff work from home whenever possible (i.e. administrative staff)
- Staggering start times, breaks and lunches
- Suspending all group activities and gatherings

## EVALUATE

Ask and evaluate:

- Were the proper hygiene facilities (handwashing equipment) made available?
- Were physical distancing measures implemented?
- Was the personal protective equipment (PPE) required to protect staff while doing their job available?
- Was training on the proper use of PPE provided?
- Did staff know what to do if they had symptoms? Did they follow the recommended protocols?
- Are you aware of emergency risks in your region and how to prepare for different situations?

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Consider consulting with the joint health and safety committee (JHSC) or health and safety representative (HSR) on written measures and procedures and training and education for the health and safety of workers. Considerations needed to protect workers from the risk of COVID-19 are:

- Safe work practices
- Safe working conditions
- Proper hygiene practices and the use of hygiene facilities
- Control of infections
- Immunization against infectious diseases
- Use of appropriate antiseptics, disinfectants and decontaminants
- Use, wearing and care of personal protective equipment and its limitations (such as gloves, gowns, facial protection and respirators).

Office employers are encouraged to review the measures and procedures at least once a year or more frequently. Additional duties and obligations under OHS Regulations are available at: [Industrial Establishments Reg. 851](#)



## MINISTRY OF LABOUR TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT (MLTSD) REQUIREMENTS

The MLTSD is focused on providing enhanced protections for workers. Announced on March 16<sup>th</sup>, these protections include expanded protected leaves and improving access to Employment Insurance (EI) benefits. Click here for more information: [Job Protection COVID-19](#).

## TRACK AND MONITOR YOUR WORKFORCE

Due to the latency period of COVID-19, it is important to track where employees have worked. If an employee tests positive for COVID-19, the local public health unit will ask employers to provide information on where the employee worked as well as the contact information of any other employee who may have been exposed. Employers will track information and Public Health Units will respond.

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*The more detailed your information is, the better Public Health can respond and help.*

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## OFFICE SECTOR RESOURCES

### COVID-19 GOVERNMENT UPDATES

Stay updated with daily government updates:

- <https://www.ontario.ca/page/2019-novel-coronavirus> (Ontario COVID-19 webpage)
- <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html> (Canada COVID-19 webpage)
- <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/> (Public Health Ontario)

### ONTARIO GOVERNMENT AND AGENCY ISSUED RESOURCES ABOUT COVID-19

#### PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html>

This link outlines the actions being taken by the Government of Canada to limit spread of the virus, as well as what is happening in provinces and communities across the country. It also maintains a live update of the number of cases by province.

#### WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

WHO provides the latest guidance and information related to the global outbreak and spread beyond Canadian borders. It also provides the most up-to-date information on:



- current research and development around the virus
- a COVID-19 situation “dashboard”
- emergency preparedness measures; and,
- live media updates on the spread of the virus.

## OTHER RESOURCES

There is a host of additional resources available to help address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that are aimed at all workplaces. Resources include:

- The Government of Canada’s guide for [Preventing COVID-19 in the workplace: Employers, employees and essential service workers](#)
- The Harvard Business Review’s [Employer Preparedness Questions](#)
- [Public Health Unit websites:](#)  
<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx>
- Government of Canada, COVID-19 Taking Care of Your Mental Health:  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/taking-care-mental-health.html>

## PUBLIC SERVICES HEALTH AND SAFETY ASSOCIATION RESOURCES

- Occupational Illness: Infectious Disease Reporting Form:  
<https://www.pshsa.ca/resources/occupational-illness-infectious-disease-reporting-form>
- COVID-19 Resources: <https://www.pshsa.ca/covid-19>
- Maintaining an Effective JHSC During Emergency Situations COVID 19 :  
<https://www.pshsa.ca/resources/maintaining-an-effective-jhsc-during-emergency-situations-covid-19>