

Workplace Safety & Prevention Services Guidance on Health and Safety for Office Administration and Secretarial Staff during COVID-19

OVERVIEW

During the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak, we all need to do our part to keep workers, customers and the public safe and healthy so we can stop the spread and prepare to reopen the province, when we are ready.

Below is a set of resources, tips and best practices to help employers and employees prevent the spread of COVID-19 and work together to reopen the province.

Employers and workers in Ontario have certain duties and rights under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations. Employers should also review and follow any applicable directives and guidance coming from the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Ministry of Health.

Learn more about:

- [workers' rights](#)
- [employers' responsibilities](#)
- [Duties of Employers and Other Persons](#)

BEST PRACTICES

We know that every workplace is unique which makes it so important that every workplace assess functions carried out by their workforce to ensure they take action to protect against the hazards presented by exposure to COVID-19.

Practicing physical distancing (staying 2 metres away from others), minimizing contact with droplets of mucous or saliva, keeping hands, surfaces and objects clean, and preventing contact with potentially infected people – are all critically important measures. Other information on how you can protect yourself is available on ontario.ca/coronavirus.

We have provided some recommendations below for your consideration. Please keep in mind that introducing any new protective measures should be done as part of a full review of other workplace hazards - not just COVID-19. Employers should consult with Joint Health and Safety Committees/Health and Safety Representatives on measures to protect workers in the workplace.

Some workplaces may already have some existing controls in place that may help reduce the risk of exposure to workers, so regular 'check-ins' on the effectiveness of controls is highly recommended.

RECOGNIZE HAZARDS AND ASSESS RISK

For secretarial and other office administration sector employees we recognize that you may have contact with people, including co-workers, customers and suppliers (i.e. within 2 metres). These interactions, as well as the need to touch work surfaces and equipment could increase the likelihood that you or your customers could come in contact with the virus.

Take a look at where you might minimize those risks within your workplace. People who are sick or have signs of illness (e.g. fever, coughing, runny nose, tiredness, shortness of breath) [should self-isolate](#). Consult [public health information](#) to learn more about the symptoms of COVID-19 infection. Recognize and report these hazards and use appropriate controls. Ensure that you or your co-workers stay home if you or they have symptoms.

Take a look at the controls below to see how they may assist you.

CONTROLS

All existing safety, sanitation, and infection control standards established by licensing agencies and public health authorities are still in effect and enforced. Already existing controls may help to reduce the risk of exposure for workers (e.g. following practices required by the Local/Provincial Health Unit).

To protect yourself from some of the risk of exposure to COVID-19, consider the following options:

Keep Informed and Communicate

- Screen customers and staff regularly for health issues. This may include reminders to customers on websites and via telephone messages. If anyone develops symptoms of COVID-19, implement procedures for reporting the illness and keeping the worker away from others. For further guidance on screening procedures, consult the [Ministry of Health](#).
- It is recommended that your business creates a COVID-19 safety plan to assist in putting the controls into place to make the workplace safer for everyone. Talk to your workers and your JHSC members or health and safety representatives, if any, for their input on the plan. Share the plan with all workplace parties when it is done. This will help ensure your workers and others understand how you plan to manage the risks of COVID-19. Review, evaluate and update your plan regularly. For more information to help create your safety plan, refer to [Ontario.ca](#) and the [WSPS Pandemic Playbook](#).
- Communicate that it is not permitted for anyone to enter the business if individuals have symptoms of COVID-19. For example, install clear signage throughout the workplace, including the points of entry.
- Ensure that illness reporting requirements are well communicated in the workplace through training and signage. People who are sick or have signs of illness (e.g. fever, coughing, runny nose, tiredness, shortness of breath) must self-isolate, notify their employer and call a doctor or healthcare provider.
- Encourage workers to monitor their own symptoms at all times and ensure that they know where to find assessment tools. Ask workers to use the tool at home if they have any symptoms and to follow the instructions. Ensure workers know who their workplace contact is and how to get in touch with them in case the self-assessment, public health or their health care provider suggests they self-isolate, or if they start to experience symptoms at work.
- Ensure employees with symptoms self-isolate and check in regularly with these individuals throughout their isolation period.
- Update your business's voicemail, email, social media, website and other external communications to inform customers of changes to the business operations.
- Provide clear information and instruction to your workers. Make sure they know what they need to do to protect themselves and others. Ensure they know how to follow the work and hygiene practices in your plan, including all new safety measures. Employers need to train workers on possible COVID-19 transmission points in the workplace, what steps are being taken to protect them, and how they can protect themselves, including frequent hand washing especially before and after each client interaction, sanitizing items and surfaces more frequently, following tool disinfection procedures, and not touching their face.
- Follow all municipal and [local public health warnings](#), directions and recommendations related to COVID-19. Consider regular times to check in with public health updates and retrain/revise practices as needed.
- Share information in all languages spoken by your workers, if possible. Provide information in ways that are easy to understand, like graphics and pictures, and use resources from the Ontario government. [WSPS Sector Posters](#) are also available.
- Remind workers about available social and mental health supports, and encourage them to use these [resources](#).
- Share information to help your workers stay healthy while travelling between home and work.
- Ensure that measures you decide on are well communicated.

Eliminate or Minimize Exposure

Physical Distancing

- Install physical distancing markers throughout the reception area and other areas depending on the size of the facility, including the entrance area outside the premises if appropriate, to ensure customers maintain a physical distance of 2 meters.

- Limit the number of workers working in one space so that they can distance themselves from each other by:
 - Staggering shifts and break times and scheduling more time for cleaning in between customers.
 - Control entry/exit points
 - Practicing physical distancing during breaks.
 - Where possible, have their workstations or chairs positioned to maintain the physical distance.
- Consider installing transparent hard plastic barriers where physical distancing is not an option

Disinfection and Sanitizing

- Encourage workers to maintain clean work stations, debit machines, cash registers, counters, and equipment. Provide hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes for clients to use upon entry. Consider having them available near the entryway, waiting areas, at reception and other high-traffic areas.
- Provide a safe place for individuals to dispose of used sanitizing wipes and disposable protective equipment. Empty and clean waste containers on a regular basis.
- Surfaces that come in contact with customers must be disinfected prior to and after each customer service performed.
- Clean and disinfect/sterilize equipment such as keyboards and mice, printers/photocopiers, and shared work desks and other equipment between clients/ employees. Public Health Ontario offers more information on [clean and disinfect](#) protocols.

Hand Hygiene

- Ensure all hand-washing facilities are available and in good working order.
- Proper handwashing is key. Workers should be trained in the proper hand washing technique and avoid touching their face. Extra handwashing is a good idea for everyone – and when that’s not possible, a hand sanitizer with minimum alcohol content of 60% should be used frequently.
- Encourage workers and visitors to [wash their hands](#) before entering the workplace, after contact with others, or with surfaces others have touched. Be sure to include handwashing before breaks, at shift changes, after making or receiving deliveries etc. Be sure to keep an adequate supply of soap, paper towels, etc.
- To avoid droplet dispersion, encourage proper cough and sneeze etiquette through the use of posted reminders and other communications.

Customers/ Clients

- Consider managing customer volume by using appointments and have them book online and by phone, minimizing walk-ins, or communicate virtually whenever possible (i.e. working with customers/clients regarding advertisements).
- Consider limiting customer capacity if unable to maintain physical distancing.
- Eliminate restrictions and penalties on cancellations to encourage clients to reschedule if they are feeling unwell. Consider minimizing or eliminating exposures by having customers pre-pay by electronic options, if this isn’t possible [clean and disinfect](#) payment devices between customers.
- Waiting areas inside your business should be closed and not available to the public. Consider signage at the door to inform the public, and inform your customers of this online/during booking.
- Remove chairs from the waiting area to make sure people do not sit close together or wait in groups.
- Any waiting area for your customers should have books, service menus, pens and other frequently touched items removed. Reception desks should also have unnecessary items removed as well as pens, paper, etc.
- Where possible, assign workers to ensure staff and customers are utilizing sanitizing materials, following physical distancing protocols and screening for customers presenting COVID-19 related symptoms.

OTHER CONTROL MEASURES

- Limit the number of people sharing equipment or tools. If this has not been done before, assign each worker a unique set of tools for their use only.
- Where appropriate, safely work/meet in outdoor spaces.
- Where appropriate, ventilate spaces by opening doors.

In addition to the above recommendations, employers should determine whether personal protective equipment (PPE)* needs to be part of their hazard control plan. The need for PPE should be based on a risk assessment that may take into consideration input from the local public health unit. Although proper use of PPE can help prevent some exposures, it should not take the place of other control measures.

***NOTE:** Please be reminded that face coverings (non-medical masks) do not constitute PPE and are not an appropriate substitute for physical distancing in the workplace.

To learn more about PPE as well as face coverings, please refer to these sections in the Guide to Developing your Workplace COVID-19 Safety Plan at [ontario.ca](https://www.ontario.ca) or see the WSPS Pandemic Playbook [WSPS Pandemic Playbook](#).

POTENTIAL CASE OF, OR SUSPECTED EXPOSURE TO, COVID-19 AT YOUR WORKPLACE

There are steps that you will need to take if one of your workers has symptoms which may be related to COVID-19, or is diagnosed with COVID-19. For information regarding what to do, please refer to the information available on [ontario.ca](https://www.ontario.ca)

EVALUATION

COVID-19 has presented all of us with challenges we have never seen before. It's important to consider that any of the adjustments we are making today, may need further adjustment tomorrow.

It is recommended that you take a look at your preventative measures on an ongoing basis, and adjust them if they are not working well enough or causing other issues with your work. For example, if you decided to use goggles, but they are impeding your vision, or are making other tasks unnecessarily difficult, you may want to try a face shield instead. Or, if you decided you needed a certain kind of disinfectant that is no longer available, identifying alternative disinfecting products or solutions or switching to soap and water practices may be reasonable substitutes.

Bottom line? Plan to make regular check-ins and adjustments part of *your* COVID-19 infection prevention plans.

*For anyone who thinks they may have been exposed to or are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, please start by visiting the Ministry of Health website and taking a [self-assessment](#).

RESOURCES

Stay updated with daily government updates:

- [Government of Ontario](#)
- [Government of Canada](#)
- [Public Health Ontario](#)

Ontario government and agency-issued resources about COVID-19

The [Ontario Ministry of Health](#) is providing consistent updates on the provincial government's response to the outbreak, including:

- status of cases in Ontario
- current affected areas
- symptoms and treatments
- how to protect yourself and self-isolate
- updated Ontario news on the virus

[Public Health Ontario](#) is providing up-to-date resources on COVID-19, including:

- links to evolving public health guidelines, position statements and situational updates
- synopsis of key articles updating on the latest findings related to the virus
- recommendations for use of personal protective equipment
- information on infection prevention and control

- testing information
- other public resources

The Ontario government is supporting employers by setting up a portal to assist them in finding supplies and equipment through the [Workplace PPE Supplier Directory](#).

OTHER COVID-19 RESOURCES

[Health Canada](#) 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.

The [World Health Organization](#) is updating 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
- live media updates on the spread of the virus

This resource does not replace the *Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHS)* and its regulations, and should not be used as or considered legal advice. Health and safety inspectors apply the law based on the facts in the workplace.

For more information visit www.wsps.ca/COVID19

NOTE: This document is intended for informational purposes only to provide an overview of the potential hazards posed in the workplace due to COVID-19. It is not intended as medical advice, to provide a comprehensive risk assessment for all workplaces, or to replace any legislated workplace safety obligations. WSPS has not endorsed and does not endorse any particular product or company as a solution to the risk presented by COVID-19. Due to the ongoing evolution of the situation in Ontario and around the world, this document may be used as a guide for Employers in addition to guidance delivered by public health authorities such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Ontario Ministry of Health, Public Health Ontario and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Any use which is made of this document by any Employer or individual, or any reliance on or decisions to be made based on it, are the responsibility of the Employer or individual. WSPS and its partners, officers, directors, employees, agents, representatives, suppliers and service providers accept no responsibility for any errors or omissions in content or for damages of any kind or nature suffered by any Employer or any third party as a result of use of or reliance on this communication.