

# Workplace Safety & Prevention Services

## Guidance on Health and Safety for Office Sector during COVID-19

### OVERVIEW

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

Employers and constructors have obligations to protect workers from hazards in the workplace as set out in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations and 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 rapidly, the legislation and regulations used to govern Ontario's workplaces are not.

Under Ontario law, employers have the duty to keep workers and work sites safe and free of hazards. 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 or constructor 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

A new type of virus, known as COVID-19, is causing an outbreak of respiratory (lung) disease. The severity of this illness can vary from person to person. There are steps you can take to prevent the spread of infection. This document provides information to help you while working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### RECOGNIZE AND ASSESS

COVID-19 can cause a range of symptoms, including fever, cough, sore throat and shortness of breath. These symptoms can appear in a few days or up to 14 days after being exposed to the virus. For some people, the symptoms are like having a cold; for others they may be severe or life-threatening.

The virus is transmitted via droplets during close, unprotected contact with an infected person, or by touching an infected surface and then the mouth, nose, or eyes.

Keeping safe at work involves understanding how people could come into contact with COVID-19 as they perform their jobs, and then taking steps to minimize contact.

People such as office administrators, administrative secretaries, customer service representatives, and maintenance staff are just some of those in the office sector who need to consider how they can work safely and prevent the spread.

The symptoms of COVID-19 are like many other illnesses, including the cold and flu. At this time, it is recommended that any worker who has any symptoms related to cold, flu or COVID-19 should be sent home.

In addition, employers should advise these workers to complete the online self-assessment or call either:

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

## CONTROLS

Here are a number of options for protecting office workers from exposure to COVID-19:

- Allow anyone who can to work from home.
- Train everyone 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 or sanitizing, and not touching their face.
- Train everyone on how to keep their work surfaces, devices, screens and equipment clean.
- Have all employees and visitors wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available, before entering the workplace, after contact with others, or with surfaces others have touched. Be sure to include handwashing before breaks and at shift changes, etc. Be sure to keep an adequate supply of soap, paper towels, etc. Provide staff with hand sanitizer for their use when receiving deliveries, interacting with the public etc.
- Limit the number of people working in one space so that they can distance themselves from each other by:
  - Staggering shifts and break times.
  - Practicing physical distancing during breaks.
  - Not entering work areas where 2 meter distance cannot be maintained
  - Closing off areas to prevent large gatherings
- Sanitize the workplace thoroughly and often, especially frequently touched surfaces and common areas, such as door handles, entryways, elevators, washrooms, and kitchens.
- Reposition workstations to increase physical distances. Install barriers and partitions.
- Reschedule unnecessary visits to the workplace by supply chain partners, vendors, delivery people or others who don't need to be there now.
- Screen workers regularly for health issues. 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 at:  
[http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/2019\\_operators\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/2019_operators_guidance.pdf)
- Introduce more fresh air by increasing the ventilation system's air intake or opening doors and windows. Avoid central recirculation where possible.

As a last resort, consider Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), which is effective only if it's appropriate for the situation and people wear it correctly. Ensure PPE training includes the fit, use, care, putting on and taking off, maintenance, cleaning and limitations of the PPE.

Disposable gloves are one example of PPE that can help limit contact with surfaces that may be infected. Set up practices for changing and disposing of gloves, such as when torn or dirty.

Respiratory protection is not the first line of defense against COVID-19. Please continue to monitor Public Health Ontario for respiratory protection advice.

## EVALUATE

COVID-19 has presented challenges workplaces have never encountered before. Keep in mind that any adjustments made today may need readjusting tomorrow. Look at preventative measures on an ongoing basis, and adjust them if they are not working well enough or causing other issues. For example, are people doing what they've been asked to do? If not, what is preventing them from doing so? Can you make adjustments and improve?

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 and Long-Term Care website and taking a self-assessment: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/self-assessment/#q0>. Please do not visit an assessment centre unless you have been referred by a health care professional. Do not call 911 unless it is an emergency.

For additional information, refer to Health Canada's website on COVID-19: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/being-prepared.html?topic=tilelink>

## RESOURCES

Stay updated with daily government updates on COVID-19:

[Government of Ontario](#)

[Government of Canada](#)

[Public Health Ontario](#)

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. 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 Organisation \(WHO\)](#), [Ontario Ministry of Health](#), [Public Health Ontario](#) and the [Centres for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).<sup>7</sup> Any use which is made of this document by any Employer, or any reliance on or decisions to be made based on it, are the responsibility of the Employer. 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.