

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) ADVICE FOR CANADIAN EMPLOYERS

A guide to understanding how to support your business and workforce through a global health emergency

Introduction

The new coronavirus disease, now officially named COVID-19, was declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization in January 2020. As the virus has the potential to spread extensively, it's likely to pose a significant challenge to many organizations.

This factsheet provides an overview of the current coronavirus state of affairs. It explains what the virus is and gives advice on how employers should respond to the virus and support employees by being prepared, looking after employees' health and safety, precautions for employees returning from travel, and developing flexible resourcing plans.

We're updating this factsheet regularly to ensure it reflects Government advice as this evolves.

What is Coronavirus?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as MERS-CoV and SARS (Cov). The official name for this new disease, not previously seen in humans, is COVID-19. It was first identified in Wuhan City, in Hubei province, China.

COVID-19 spreads in a similar way to flu, where there is close contact between people. If someone with the virus coughs or exhales and is within a metre of someone else, the other person could catch it by breathing in droplets of infected fluid. People can also catch it by touching contaminated surfaces or objects. Most people infected with the virus have mild symptoms and recover, but some experience more serious illness and may need hospital care. People over 40 seem to be more vulnerable, as are those with

weakened immune systems or an underlying health condition such as diabetes, heart and lung disease.

The incubation period of COVID-19 is between two and 14 days. Common signs of infection include a cough, difficulty in breathing and a fever.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has assessed the public health risk associated with COVID-19 as low for Canada. Public health risk is continually reassessed as new information becomes available.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the virus a public health emergency of international concern. Although it's spreading around the world, and spreading quickly, it's yet to be classed as a 'pandemic'. A pandemic, in WHO terms, is 'the worldwide spread of a disease'. It's still unclear how severe the virus is, and how far it will spread.

How Employers Should Respond to the COVID-19 Virus

As the virus continues to spread, it could pose a significant risk to some organizations. We live in a global economy and many employers have operations or supply chains based overseas. The level of risk an organization may face will depend on whether it's directly or indirectly affected in this way. An organization may also be affected if it employs people who have travelled back, or been in contact with, anyone who has returned from an area affected by the virus. People's health and well-being, and measures to prevent the virus from spreading should be at the heart of every employer's response.

If the virus becomes a pandemic it could lead to wider disruptions with suppliers and customers and to shortages of fuel and other basic commodities. There may also be disruptions to public transport and large social or sporting events, and school closures.

Be Informed and Prepared

- **Keep up to date with Government and public health advice:** This is a fast-moving issue. Employers should keep up to date with the situation as it develops and refer employees who are concerned about infection to official and expert medical sources such as [CDC](#), [WHO](#) and the [GOV](#). There are basic but effective ways to help prevent the infection's spread including:
 - Washing hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.
 - Avoiding touching eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
 - Avoiding close contact with people who are sick.
 - Staying home when sick.
 - Covering a cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throwing the tissue in the trash.
 - Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- **Develop a contingency plan:** Every organization will need to assess its own level of exposure to business disruption caused by the virus. If it has a site, conducts business or has supply chains in China or an affected region, there will be a direct impact to the company's day-to-day operations. The plan will need to take account of current and potential impacts and manage the specific business risks associated with the disruption, including service delivery and workforce issues. Communicate the plan to key teams and individuals across the business.

- **Build a contingency team:** Identify a person, or small group of people, to take responsibility for operating the contingency plan and allocate clear responsibilities for its implementation.
- **As the situation develops:** Those responsible for the contingency plan should meet regularly to review the preparations and ensure they are still fit for purpose. It's important to act early, even if planned contingencies are not then needed.

Look After People's Health, Well-being and Safety

Employees' health, safety and well-being during a global health emergency like COVID-19 should be paramount. Employers have a statutory duty of care for people's health and safety, and to provide a safe place to work, but there's also a strong moral responsibility to ensure that employees feel safe and secure in their employment. Employers need to be proactive to protect their people and minimize the risk of the virus spreading.

Many people will be concerned about the risk of infection and will need reassurance. Communicate clearly to employees that they need to take basic hygiene precautions such as effective handwashing, avoid travel to affected areas and/or coming into contact with infected or potentially infected people. Follow official public health and medical advice closely and advise them on what to do if they think they may have caught the virus or are at risk of contracting it.

Wider Health and Well-being Concerns

- Keep up to date and follow official medical advice as it's updated. Reassure employees if they have concerns, and keep them well informed about your organization's policies and contingency plans, particularly in relation to the specific guidelines for employees who have returned from affected areas, or have been in contact with an infected person, or with an individual who has returned from affected areas. As the spread of the virus continues, employers need to evaluate their sick policies and provide guidance to employees, including, managers, on how these will be implemented. Actively communicate this advice with your people, customers and suppliers.
- Implement an internal communication strategy so that employees are aware of measures being taken to manage the situation in your organization. Understand that some people may have real concerns about catching the virus, while others may have worries about family or friends stranded in, or returning from, an affected area. It's important to strike the balance between your organization and its people being prepared for the spread of the virus whilst reassuring people that there is no need to panic. Ensure that line managers are regularly informed about the organization's contingency plans and how to discuss the situation with any concerned employees, and where to direct people to for further advice or support, including employee assistance programs and/or counselling if they are anxious.
- Promote the resources you have available to support people's health and well-being generally, including those offered through an employee assistance program.
- If the virus spreads widely and/or becomes a pandemic and the risk of infection is heightened, be prepared to step up the level of support you provide to staff and adjust

your resourcing plans accordingly. Keep in mind anyone who may be more vulnerable due to a pre-existing health condition, or disability, age, or pregnancy, and be aware of the additional duties you have as an employer to these specific groups of employees.

Develop Flexible Resourcing Plans

- As part of your organization's contingency plan, explore more flexible resourcing strategies in case your business experiences staffing shortages. If roles can't be performed at home, consider more innovative resourcing solutions that may need to be deployed, such as split shifts, flexible work hours or outsourcing to cover essential operations or services.
- Develop strategies to maximize the amount of remote work to prevent the spread of infection if necessary. There are many roles that could be performed remotely with little disruption to service delivery.
- Investigate ways of using technology to limit the amount of face-to-face contact, for example, video conferencing to facilitate remote meetings. For customer-facing organizations, consider introducing or maximizing the use of self-service options and online services. Consider issuing staff with laptops or the equipment required to work remotely if necessary.
- Increased sickness absence may create a need for other employees, if willing, to work longer hours to keep your business going. If this happens, you will need to comply with your province's labour laws and employment standards to ensure appropriate length of weekly and daytime working hours, night shifts and rest breaks.
- Have plans ready to enable your organization to operate on a skeleton staff if necessary. Identify key services and roles that are essential and can't be put on hold, as well as projects or roles that could be temporarily stood down. Identify those individuals and managers who have transferrable skills, who can fulfill more than one function and could be allocated to more essential roles.
- Carry out a resourcing risk assessment of the organization, identifying essential areas of the business where few employees have the required skills. Training additional employees in these skills should be considered. Ensure that procedures are developed to ensure smooth handovers for employees who are filling in for colleagues in unfamiliar roles. It may be necessary to provide additional training and a risk assessment if individuals are moving to roles where there may be a health and safety risk.
- If your operations are severely affected, consider introducing a voluntary special leave policy on a temporary basis whereby individuals can opt to take paid or unpaid leave. Be mindful that there could be some employees who are willing to take additional time off and welcome a break, but others may struggle financially if they lose pay. Consider offering a shorter working week or other flexible resourcing arrangements, and communicate the business reasons to employees.

If You Think You Have Been Exposed

If you are not in an area where COVID-19 is spreading, or if you have not travelled from one of those areas or have not been in close contact with someone who has and is feeling unwell, your chances of getting it are currently low.

Persons infected with the virus should receive supportive care to help relieve symptoms. There is no specific antiviral treatment recommended for COVID-19 infection.

Those who think they may have been exposed to COVID-19 should contact their healthcare provider immediately.

Following recognized practices to avoid exposures common to any respiratory virus will help to keep this threat in check.

Proper planning can help protect both your employees, customers and your business.

Useful Resources

- [Government of Canada, Public Health Agency](#)
- [Government of Canada, Awareness Resources](#)
- [Government of Canada, Travel Notices](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [World Health Organization – Getting your Workplace Ready for COVID-19](#)
- [World Health Organization Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Outbreak](#)

BC Specific Links

- [BC Centre For Disease Control](#)
- [Vancouver Coastal Health](#)
- [BC Government News Updates](#)

**The information in this document was sourced from [HUB Risk Update covid-19](#) and [CIPD Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Advice For UK Employers](#)*