

March 21, 2020

Best Practices - Responding to a potential COVID-19 exposure in the Workplace

Workplace responsibilities when dealing with a suspected case of COVID-19


What should you do if you are at work and think you are experiencing symptoms that could be due to COVID-19? Firstly, isolate yourself from other workers, wash or disinfect your hands, avoid touching common surfaces, cover your mouth and/or put on a facemask if one is available and advise your supervisor of your concerns. These simple measures could protect the spread of the virus at your workplace, and protect other workers as well as the general public.

Your employer's health and safety policy will hopefully be updated (or some recent COVID -19 communications) will address the current COVID-19 crisis, and the protocols for responding to a suspected case will also be readily available. If, however, your employer's health and safety policy has not been revised to capture COVID -19, the following has been developed to help provide some guidance for the employee, the supervisor, the employer, and if applicable, the constructor/client/owner to respond to a suspected case of COVID-19. Keep in mind that circumstances and best practices are rapidly changing as the information evolves.

Symptoms of COVID-19 range from mild – like the flu and other common respiratory infections – to severe. Common signs of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties.

There is a general duty on all employers and constructors under the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) to take all reasonable precautions to provide a safe work environment. With regards to COVID-19, anyone exhibiting symptoms should be sent home immediately and asked to protect other workers on the site and the general public. Other employees who may have been exposed should be informed of the potential exposure and asked to leave the worksite and self-isolate themselves for at least a 14 day period or until a diagnosis of COVID-19 has been ruled out by health authorities.

The Public Health Agency of Canada encourages any person who has even mild symptoms to stay home and call the public health authority to be assessed. The local public health authority can offer advice to the employee on what they need to do.

SELF-MONITORING	SELF-ISOLATION	ISOLATION
 <p>You have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ no symptoms <p>AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ a history of possible exposure to the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19, in the last 14 days	<p>You have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ no symptoms <p>AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ a history of possible exposure to the novel coronavirus due to travel outside of Canada or close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19	<p>You have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ symptoms, even if mild <p>AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ you have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or are waiting for the results of a lab test for COVID-19

See <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/self-monitoring-self-isolation-isolation-for-covid-19.html> for additional information.

The following guidance and recommendations are offered to assist in responding to a suspected case of COVID-19 appearing in the workplace.

Response for employees:

- If you are an employee who begins to feel unwell (fever, new cough or difficulty breathing, etc.), you should immediately isolate yourself from other workers, wash or disinfect your hands, avoid touching common surfaces, cover your mouth and/or put on a facemask if one is available, and advise your supervisor of your concerns.
- You can be of great assistance to minimize the potential spread of the virus at your workplace and protect your co-workers by letting your supervisor know the details of whom you have been in contact with in your workplace (and when), what tools and/or equipment you were using and where you were on that day, and previous days if possible. Proper history is necessary to help prevent spreading of COVID-19.
- If you are not familiar with the COVID -19 protocol, ask your supervisor for the employer's health and safety protocols currently in place for responding to COVID-19 and follow the employer's guidance for leaving the workplace and returning home so that you can enter self-isolation at home immediately and or seek the appropriate medical advice.
- Before leaving the worksite, provide your contact information plus obtain the phone number for the supervisor and your employer so that you can call and provide an update on your status as well as inform them of any possible COVID-19 test results (providing you are able to get tested) as soon as you get the results. If the results are negative, it will allow any other workers that are in self isolation to learn they are not at risk and may allow them to return to work.

People who are self-isolating should seek clinical assessment over the phone - either through Telehealth Ontario (1-866-797-0000) or by calling their primary care provider's office. If need additional assessment is needed, their primary care provider or Telehealth provide direct to receive to in-person care options. Note currently there is a 3 day wait to talk to a Registered Nurse so utilize the internet and trusted sites for more information.

Response for Supervisors:

- Ensure the potentially affected employee is reasonably isolated from other workers and protect yourself from possible contact or transmission by practicing social distancing by maintaining a minimum 1 metre (2 metre preferred) distance, wash or disinfect your hands and avoid touching common surfaces.
- If the employee does not already have one, supply them with a mask, or anything to cover their mouth such as a clean rag or scarf and ask them to wash their hands to limit transmission.
- Refer to the employer's health and safety protocols for responding to suspected COVID-19 cases. (Ideally, you will be familiar with this ahead of time.)
- With assistance of the potentially affected employee,
 - Create a list of people that this employee could have been in direct contact with that day and if possible, in previous days.
 - Create a list of locations where the employee was recently working.
 - Create a list of tools and equipment the employee was recently using.
 - Disinfect the area the worker was in, any tools/equipment and any common surfaces they may have been in contact with.
- Ask the potentially affected employee to leave the workplace immediately, return home and self-isolate or enter isolation as recommended by public health officials and seek proper medical advice
 - Since you may have potentially been exposed, request on behalf of all concerned including other potentially affected workers, that the employee share the COVID-19 test results as soon as possible, so those that had direct exposure and who are currently in voluntary self-isolation can be advised if they can end their self-isolation or not.

Report the suspected case of COVID-19 directly to the employer and the constructor/client/owner of the worksite so they may follow up with their health and safety protocols and responsibilities. As supervisor, you may be responsible to assess the potentially contaminated areas, tools and equipment to ensure the appropriate isolation plus cleaning and disinfecting processes are followed.

- The employer's and constructor's protocols don't identify who will clean and disinfect, it will be the supervisor's responsibility to arrange for any cleaning of tools and surfaces that the potentially affected worker came in contact with and how to clean work common areas under the control of the employer, such as a lunchroom. Keep other personnel from accessing the area(s) until deemed safe.
- The health and safety protocols of the employer and the constructor/client/owner of the work site may require further actions of the supervisor. For example, the supervisor may be asked to:
 - Reach out to all the other personnel that this potentially affected worker (the worker that is suspected to have COVID-19) had recently been in direct contact with. This may include co-workers, other employer's trade workers, coffee truck person and delivery people for example.
 - Identify locations where the potentially affected worker had recently been. These locations are potentially contaminated by the COVID-19 virus and initiate immediate cleaning and disinfection.

Health guidelines may also specify how long the virus can live on surfaces, and if it is appropriate to set equipment aside for a period as a disinfectant procedure.

Maintain confidentiality where possible. The supervisor should consult with their employer to consider the extent to which the identity of the employee, must be disclosed to others in order to appropriately protect their identity. Before disclosing the identity of an employee, employers need to consider whether a generic communication will suffice. It may be enough to simply state that it is believed they were exposed to “someone” that had been working in close proximity to them, who has suspected COVID-19, and that they should protect themselves as appropriate, watch for symptoms, and possibly self-isolate, however, if the identity needs to be disclosed to ensure the safety of others possibly in contact then judgement needs to be exercised.

Identify tools and equipment that the potentially affected worker had recently been using. These are also potentially contaminated by the COVID-19 virus and those need to be immediately cleaned and disinfected.

Response for Employer:

- Review your COVID-19 protocols before an incident happens. Make sure your procedures are clear that if employees are not well or experiencing any symptoms; they must stay at home and self-isolate and not risk other employees or the public at large. Ensure your policy has established appropriate response protocols that can be followed.
- Upon learning of a suspected case of COVID-19, you should implement the protocols for responding to the situation.
- As the employer, you and the constructor both share responsibilities to protect workers on a project and should work together to this end. The response can include the following measures:
- Ensure the supervisor has requested the potentially affected worker (the worker that is suspected to have COVID-19) to leave the workplace immediately, return home and to self-isolate or enter isolation as recommended by public health officials, and seek medical advice.
- Consider advising the worker as soon as possible, of any financial assistance available for workers in self-isolation. The Government of Canada has increased Employment Insurance (EI) benefits with no waiting time, extended coverages etc... as well as a new Emergency Care Benefit. Details are available on the government websites.
- In addition the Ontario Provincial Government passed legislation that provides job-protected leave to employees in isolation or quarantine due to COVID-19, including when the employer directs the employee not to work.
- Direct the supervisor to:
 - Reach out to all the other personnel that the potentially affected worker has recently been in direct contact with. This may include co-workers and potentially other trade workers, coffee truck, and delivery people for example.
 - Maintain confidentiality – review the recommendation the text box on this subject provided to the supervisor above.
 - A risk assessment for workers that have worked closely with the potentially affected employee needs to be conducted based on the circumstances (including exposure, validity of the potential exposure and symptoms). Those workers could also possibly be removed from the workplace for at least 14 days, or until COVID-19 is ruled out. Determining if

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these other workers were exposed is dependent on the circumstances of the work process and interactions with the potentially affected employee. When the exposed workers are not direct employees, this will require communicating with the constructor and other employers.

- Identify locations where the potentially affected worker had recently been and determine how to address decontamination. Advise other potentially affected workplace parties and cordon off potentially infected areas. Inform the constructor of areas of common use. Take steps to ensure the cleanliness of the workplace where this worker was working.
- Identify tools and equipment that the potentially affected worker had recently been using and how to address decontamination. Ensure other workers do not use these tools until they are determined to be clean. Isolate the tools and equipment until cleaned and disinfected.
- Your protocol for COVID-19 should identify who will be responsible to arrange and oversee any cleaning of tools, equipment or surfaces that the potentially affected worker came in contact with.

Response for Constructor:

- As the constructor, you have control of the workplace and the personnel and are therefore in a position to ensure the protocols you establish are known by everyone on site and are followed.
- Review your COVID-19 protocols before an incident happens. Make sure your procedures are clear that if workers are not well or experiencing any symptoms; they must stay at home, self-isolate and not risk other employees or the public in general, and seek medical advice.
- You and the employers/contractors on your project share similar responsibilities to protect workers on a project and you should work together to this end. The response can include the following measures:
 - Reach out to the employer of the potentially affected worker to learn what measures are being taken and ensure they address your protocol requirements.
 - Ensure all potentially affected workers and visitors that may have been in direct contact with the potentially affected worker have been informed of the suspected case of COVID-19 and asked to stay home and self-isolate if appropriate. The constructor has oversight of all workers on a project and would be responsible to address this with potentially affected visitors and other trade workers that are not under the direct control of the potentially affected worker's employer.
 - Maintain confidentiality – review the recommendation the text box on this subject provided to the supervisor above.
 - Ensure the locations where the potentially affected worker had recently been, are cleaned and disinfected as appropriate for the circumstances. These locations are potentially contaminated by the COVID-19 virus.
 - Additional measures the constructor should consider taking:
- Communicate with personnel on site that a suspected case of COVID-19 was identified.
- Advise workers to be cautious and if they displaying symptoms over the next 14 days and to stay home and self isolate if they begin to display symptoms.
- Post updated notices regarding financial assistance for workers that who might be directed to self-isolate for reason of COVID-19. This may encourage workers to be more forthcoming with their symptoms if they know there is some help to deal with the isolation and lost income.
- Post and communicate policies and protocols the site is following for the protection from COVID-19.

It is essential that all workplace parties co-ordinate with each other communicate their policies/protocols and expectations to each other. All workers and all contractors should be following similar protocols to be proactive for prevention of transmission and, for the actions to be taken for

suspected COVID-19 cases.

It is important that all document the process, the steps taken, those involved (with contact information) and decisions made to ensure that a record is maintained for further investigation and follow-up.

It is also important to relay to workers, any financial assistance that is available to help effected workers that declare symptoms and the others that may also be asked to leave to self-isolate. Consider providing an information package to help workers that are sent home to self-isolate.

The expectations for reaction and resources available, and the protective measures are subject to change often in this dynamic environment and good communication will avoid misinformation, misunderstanding and help the workplace minimize the effect of COVID -19 at the workplace.

For the most up-to-date information on how individuals and employers can protect themselves as well as what to do if they suspect they may be at risk, please visit [Ontario.ca/coronavirus](https://www.ontario.ca/coronavirus).

These are certainly unprecedented times. Things are evolving very quickly as governments around the world make new statements every single day. There's a sense of stress and concern that is weighing on everyone. It's imperative that we all work together to keep everyone safe!

Further resources can be found on the IHSA web site:
www.ihsa.ca Or <https://www.ihsa.ca/alerts/COVID-19>

[As well as:](#)

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

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/2019-novel-coronavirus>