

2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Workplaces / Businesses and Employers

COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus that can cause respiratory illness. For more general information about COVID-19, see the [Toronto Public Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Fact Sheet](#).

The following interim guidance are recommendations to help reduce the risk of workplace exposures to acute respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19, in non-healthcare settings. The guidance also provides planning considerations if there is community spread of COVID-19.

Preventing respiratory infections (including COVID-19) in the workplace

Recommendations for employers to use now:

- **Actively encourage sick employees to stay home:**
 - Employees who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness are recommended to stay home and not go to work until they are symptoms free for at least 24 hours. Employees should notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.
 - Employers should be flexible with requiring healthcare provider's notes for employees who are sick with acute respiratory illness. Healthcare provider notes to validate employee illness or to return to work can put unnecessary strain on healthcare provider offices and medical facilities during this busy time.
 - Employers should maintain flexible policies that permit employees to stay home to care for a sick family member. During this time, employers should be aware that more employees may need to stay at home to care for sick children or other sick family members.
- **Separate sick employees:**
 - Employees who appear to have acute respiratory illness symptoms (i.e. cough, shortness of breath) upon arrival to work and employees who become sick during the day should be separated from other employees and sent home immediately.
- **Emphasize respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene by all employees:**
 - Place posters that encourage [staying home when sick](#), [cough and sneeze etiquette](#), [hand washing](#) and [hand sanitizing](#) at the entrance to your workplace and in other workplace areas where they are likely to be seen.
 - Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles for use by employees.
 - Instruct employees to clean their hands often with an alcohol-based hand rub that contains at least 70% alcohol concentration, or to wash their hands with soap and water for at least 15 seconds. Washing hands with soap and water is preferred if hands are visibly dirty.
 - Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand rub in the workplace. Ensure adequate supplies are maintained.
- **Perform routine environmental cleaning:**
 - Use your routine practices for cleaning and / or disinfection of all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, countertops, and doorknobs. Use products that are usually used in these areas and follow the directions on the label.
- **Advise employees before traveling to take certain steps:**
 - Check the Public Health Agency of Canada's [travel advisories](#) for the latest guidance and recommendations for each country to which you will travel.
 - Those who have recently travelled from Hubei Province, China (including Wuhan City) or Iran are being asked to **self-isolate** (e.g., stay home, do not attend childcare, school or work, avoid public spaces, contact with others, do not take public transit) for a total of 14 days after their last day in Hubei Province or Iran. Travellers from these areas who are Toronto residents should contact Toronto Public Health at 416-338-7600.
 - Those who have recently travelled from China (excluding Hubei Province), Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, or Northern Italy are asked to watch for signs and

symptoms which may develop up to 14 days after an exposure (i.e., last date of travel). **If they develop symptoms of COVID-19**, these individuals are being advised to **self-isolate** (e.g., stay home, do not attend childcare, school or work, avoid public spaces, contact with others, do not take public transit) and to contact Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000, their [local health unit](#) or their primary healthcare provider. Before seeking healthcare, the individual should call ahead about their travel history and symptoms. This is so the healthcare provider can make special arrangements to see them quickly, and ensure that they use proper infection control measures.

Additional workplace considerations in response to current cases of COVID-19

- Confirmed and suspect cases of COVID-19 are reported by health care providers and laboratories to public health. Workplaces other than health care settings do not need to report to public health.
- Public health performs a risk assessment for all exposures including those that may occur in a workplace
- Public health will provide advice regarding any other measures that the workplace or staff may need to take to reduce the risk of transmission.
- Unless advised by Toronto Public Health through the above assessment, there are no restrictions or special measures required for contacts of suspected cases of COVID-19 in the setting. There is no need to close the setting or send people home
- Public health will advise if any special cleaning processes are recommended. Regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces and hands reduces the risk of infection.

Planning for community spread of COVID-19

Employers should plan to be able to respond in a flexible way to varying levels of severity and be prepared to change their business response plans as needed. Keep up to date with information on the [Toronto Public Health website](#).

All employers need to consider how best to decrease the spread of acute respiratory illness and lower the impact of COVID-19 in their workplace in the event of community spread. Employers should identify and communicate their plan, which may include:

- Reducing the spread among staff
- Protecting people who are at higher risk for adverse health complications
- Maintaining business operations
- Minimizing negative effects on other entities in their supply chains.

Employers should explore whether they can establish policies and practices, such as flexible worksites (e.g., telecommuting, working from home) and flexible work hours (e.g., staggered shifts), to increase the physical distance among employees. For employees with acute respiratory illness who are able to telecommute, supervisors should encourage telecommuting instead of coming into the workplace until symptoms are completely resolved. Ensure that there is technological infrastructure needed to support multiple employees who may be able to work from home.

Employers should identify essential business functions, essential jobs or roles, and critical elements within your supply chains (e.g., raw materials, suppliers, subcontractor services/products, and logistics) required to maintain business operations. Plan for how your business will operate if there is increasing absenteeism or these supply chains are interrupted.

Employers should set up procedures for altering business operations (e.g., possibly changing or closing operations in affected areas), and transferring business knowledge to key employees.

- Plan to minimize exposure between employees and also between employees and the public if Toronto Public Health recommends social distancing measures.

- Establish a process to communicate information to employees and business partners on the latest COVID-19 information. Anticipate employee fear, anxiety, rumors, and misinformation, and plan communications accordingly.
- In some situations, early childhood programs and K-12 schools may be dismissed temporarily. Determine how you will operate if absenteeism spikes from increases in sick employees, those who stay home to care for sick family members, and those who must stay home to watch their children if dismissed from school. Businesses and other employers should prepare to institute flexible workplace and leave policies for these employees.

More information

For more information, contact Toronto Public Health at 416-338-7600

References

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