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General Occupational Health Advisory: COVID-19

Public Service Occupational Health Program (PSOHP), Health Canada

Updated: 15 March 2020

Please note that this advice may change as more information becomes available.

Purpose

To provide federal employees with current occupational health advice in relation to the novel coronavirus (SARS_CoV2) which causes the disease known as COVID-19.

This is a General Advisory, for more detailed guidance on specific workplaces or work situations please consult the relevant Annex.

At this time, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has assessed the public health risk associated with COVID-19 as low for the general population in Canada but this could change rapidly. There is an increased risk of more severe outcomes for Canadians:

- aged 65 and over
- with compromised immune systems
- with underlying medical conditions

Most federal employees are at no higher risk of contracting COVID-19 relative to members of the general public. As mentioned above, subsequent annexes have been developed for specific workplaces (e.g. points of entry or missions abroad) or temporary work situations (e.g. repatriation of Canadians) that present a higher risk of potential exposure to the novel coronavirus.

Delegated managers are encouraged to engage their departmental occupational health and safety teams with questions specifically related to their workforces as well as continue to keep their Business Continuity Plans updated.

Novel Coronavirus

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV). A novel coronavirus (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans.

The disease caused by this novel coronavirus has been given the name “COVID-19.”

Given the evolving status of this disease outbreak, please refer to [Canada.ca/coronavirus](https://www.canada.ca/coronavirus) for up-to-date information.

Some facts about the novel coronavirus:

1. COVID-19 symptoms may take up to 14 days to appear after exposure to the virus.
2. Coronaviruses are most commonly spread from an infected person through:
 - Respiratory droplets generated when you cough or sneeze
 - Close personal contact, such as touching or shaking hands, then touching your mouth, nose or eyes
 - Touching something with the virus on it, then touching your mouth, nose or eyes before washing your hands
3. The best way to prevent the spread of infections is to:
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth, especially with unwashed hands
 - Avoid close contact with people who are sick*
 - Cough and sneeze into your sleeve and not your hands
 - Stay home if you are sick to avoid spreading illness to others
 - Maintain a 2 metre distance from other people whenever possible
 - Avoid large gatherings
 - Clean and disinfect surfaces regularly

*A close contact is defined as a person who provided care for the individual, including healthcare workers, family members or other caregivers, or who had other similar close physical contact or who lived with or otherwise had close prolonged contact with a probable or confirmed case while the individual was ill.

Self-isolation

In some cases, employees may be asked by [local public health authorities](#) to [self-isolate](#) or [self-monitor](#).

If you develop symptoms of respiratory illness (fever, cough, difficulty breathing), stay home, contact your local public health authority, and follow their instructions.

Self-Isolation means limiting contact with others.

- Do not leave home unless absolutely necessary, such as to seek medical care
- Do not go to school, work or other public areas and do not use public transportation (e.g., buses, taxis)
- Arrange to have groceries and supplies dropped off at your door to minimize contact
- If possible, stay in a separate room and use a separate bathroom from others in your home
- If you have to be in contact with others, keep at least 2 metres between yourself and the other person. Keep interactions brief and wear a mask
- Avoid contact with older adults and with individuals with chronic conditions or compromised immune systems
- Avoid contact with pets if you live with other people who may also touch the pet

Self-monitoring means monitoring yourself for fever, cough and difficulty breathing and avoiding places where you cannot easily separate yourself from others if you become ill.

The most recent information can be found on the [COVID-19 site](#) for Government of Canada employees.

Advice for all employees

Hygiene measures

- Consistently use good hand hygiene measures. This includes frequent handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available
- Wash your hands regularly and before handling, preparing, serving, or eating food, or after coughing, sneezing or using the bathroom
- Protect your hands from touching dirty surfaces as you leave the bathroom. For example, use a paper towel to open the door. For more tips on effective hand washing, go to: www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/washing_hands.html
- If hands are visibly soiled, use of soap and water is recommended. If not available, soiling should be removed with an alcohol-based hand wipe first, followed by use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer

- Consider an alternative form of greeting someone other than shaking hands
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands
- Perform respiratory etiquette (cough or sneeze into the bend in your arm or in a tissue) at all times
- If you use a tissue, remember to dispose of it in a lined wastebasket as soon as possible and wash your hands afterwards or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer where soap and water are not available
- Consider cleaning and disinfecting your workstation, telephone, computer keyboards, etc. regularly with disinfectant products such as wipes

General recommendations

- Ensure healthy practices to maintain optimal physical and psychological health
- Monitor for health symptoms such as fever, cough, and difficulty breathing
- If you start having symptoms of respiratory illness, isolate yourself from others as quickly as possible. Immediately call a health care professional or local public health authority. Describe your symptoms and any travel history. They will provide advice on what you should do. Stay home if you become sick to avoid spreading illness to others. Follow local public health advice at all times
- For psychosocial support for federal employees and their families, contact your department or agency's Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Advice for all managers

Monitoring for symptoms at work

- Should an employee have a fever, cough or difficulty breathing while at the office, the manager should send the employee home (avoiding the use of public transportation) and ask them to follow the advice of the [local public health authorities](#)
- Until the employee can leave the office, they should adhere to respiratory etiquette and be kept away from others in a separate room. If a separate room is not available, the sick employee should cover their mouth and nose with a tissue and maintain as much of a spatial distance from others as is feasible (ideally at least 2 metres)
- Follow any instructions from [local public health authorities](#) regarding the exposure risk to others and consult your departmental occupational health and safety team for advice on cleaning the symptomatic employee's workspace and common areas used by the employee
- In most workplaces, cleaning floors, walls, doorknobs, etc. with regular disinfectants or soap and water is adequate. This cleaning will continue to be performed by service providers in the workplace
- At all times, the privacy of the employee must be respected

Other workplace scenarios

Below are some possible additional scenarios and the response required:

- 1. An employee who has returned from a trip abroad has contacted the employer to indicate that they been asked to self-isolate by local public health authorities for 14 days because of concerns about COVID-19. What should we do?**

The employee should follow the advice of their [local public health authority](#) as to their need for self-isolation and/or testing. If the ill employee was in the workplace recently and the manager has concerns about possible exposure of other employees, the manager should work with their [Departmental Occupational Health and Safety Coordinators](#) to determine workplace measures. At all times, the privacy of the ill worker must be respected.

- 2. An employee contacts the workplace and states that they have just been diagnosed with COVID-19. They are in isolation at home and will not be returning to work until authorized to do so by local public health authorities. What should we do?**

If the ill employee was in the workplace recently and the manager has concerns about possible exposure of other employees, the manager should work with their [Departmental Occupational Health and Safety Coordinators](#) to determine workplace measures. At all times, the privacy of the ill worker must be respected. The manager should remind the employee that if they or their family needs psychosocial support they can contact their department or agency's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

- 3. An employee contacts the workplace and states that a family member has just been diagnosed with COVID-19. What should we do?**

The manager should ask the employee to contact their local public health authority for direction on whether they should self-isolate or can go to work. If they cannot go to work, telework could be an option. At all times, the privacy of the employee must be respected.

- 4. An employee contacts the workplace and states that a family member is being tested for COVID-19. What should we do?**

The manager should ask the employee to contact their local public health authority for direction on whether they should self-isolate or can go to work. If they cannot go to work, telework could be an option. At all times, the privacy of the employee must be respected.

Cleaning protocols

- Departments are encouraged to work with service providers to review cleaning protocols for workplaces. Regular commercial disinfectant products or a solution of 1 part bleach (5% sodium hypochlorite) to 9 parts water, paying particular attention to high-touch surfaces such as elevator buttons, door handles, kitchen appliances, bathroom fixtures, water fountain knobs and push buttons, etc. can be used
- Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) is working with service providers and custodial departments to ensure service providers are able to perform cleaning and disinfection protocols as necessary
- Consider providing cleaning and disinfectant products such as wipes to employees that they can use for their workstation, telephones, computer keyboards, etc.
- Consider providing alcohol-based hand sanitizer to employees (wall dispensers or bottles) and ensure that they are regularly filled or replaced when empty

Duty Travel

- When managers are considering any work travel, or employees are considering personal travel, they should carefully think about all domestic and international travel plans considering the risks and benefits, and consult the destination page on travel.gc.ca for the latest travel advice and advisories; the [active travel health notices for COVID-19](#) and the COVID-19 affected areas list
- Note: as of March 14, 2020, **employees will be asked to self-isolate for 14 days upon return from any destination outside Canada**. Provinces and territories may have additional specific recommendations for certain groups such as health care workers. This advice is not retroactive to arrivals prior to March 14, 2020
- Global Affairs Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada are recommending that travellers avoid all non-essential travel outside of Canada
- Use judgement to review duty travel based on an analysis of the benefits and risks. Non-essential international travel should be avoided
- Invite employees to share any health concerns that they may have about travelling (some people with pre-existing medical conditions are at higher risk of developing severe COVID-19)
- Employees should always self-monitor for symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough and difficulty breathing)
- If an employee starts having symptoms, they should isolate themselves from others as quickly as possible and immediately call a health care professional or [local public health authorities](#). They should describe their symptoms and travel history. [Local public health authorities](#) will provide advice on what the employee should do

Major Events & Large Gatherings

- Departments should review any international events they may be organizing and consider other options as appropriate based on the destination page on travel.gc.ca for the latest travel advice and advisories and the [active travel health notices for COVID-19](#) and the [COVID-19 affected areas list](#). Use judgement to assess the benefits and risks
- Similarly, managers should review domestic events and meetings and consider whether to cancel by staying up to date on the domestic COVID-19 situation
- Please refer to the site [Risk-informed decision-making for mass gatherings during COVID-19 global outbreak](#) for further information and considerations

Personal protective equipment

Personal protective equipment (PPE), such as surgical-type masks and medical type gloves, should be used on the basis of risk exposure and in compliance with public health and occupational health and safety guidance for COVID-19.

PPE guidance has been developed for specific workplaces (e.g. [points of entry](#) and [missions abroad](#)). Guidance regarding PPE is developed by PSOHP as required in collaboration with departmental occupational health and safety teams.

At this time, there is no need for general use of PPE for COVID-19. The recommendations regarding PPE may be modified as the situation in Canada evolves.

The use of surgical-type mask by individuals without symptoms of cough or sneezing is not recommended and may actually increase the risk of self-contamination and risk of infection. The overuse or inappropriate use of PPE can lead to challenges with PPE availability.

Gloves are not recommended when handling documents or providing services. Regular hand hygiene and not touching the eyes, nose, and mouth is recommended at all times.

When it is apparent that a client is exhibiting symptoms of fever, cough or difficulty breathing, the client should be asked to return home and contact [local public health authorities](#).

Hand hygiene is the most effective way to prevent infection, it should be noted that the improper use of gloves can provide a false sense of security and increase the risk of infection, and therefore the use of gloves is not recommended as part of this general advice.

There may be other hazardous exposures in a work environment, unrelated to COVID-19, that require a higher level of personal protective equipment, for example chemical exposures. Please follow existing departmental OSH guidance and procedures in those

cases.

Managers are encouraged to engage their departmental occupational health and safety team with any questions regarding PPE.

Frontline service delivery: For federal workplaces that offer non-health care client services in person in Canada

Passive screening

Consider placing signage at entrance of client service area requesting that clients with symptoms of fever, cough or difficulty breathing, who have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the past 14 days or have been instructed by [local public health authorities](#) to self-isolate due to travel or contact history. Return home (avoiding public transportation), follow local public health advice and contact the department for guidance on how to obtain the required service (e.g. online, by phone).

Active screening

Consider asking clients directly if they have symptoms of fever, cough or difficulty breathing, have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the past 14 days, or have been instructed by local public health authorities to self-isolate due to travel or contact history. If they answer “yes” to one of these three questions, ask them to return home (avoiding public transportation), follow local public health advice and contact the department for guidance on how to obtain the required service including alternate delivery models (e.g. online, by phone).

- When it is apparent that a client is exhibiting symptoms of fever, cough or difficulty breathing, the client should be asked to return home and contact [local public health authorities](#)
- Until the client exits the workplace they will be asked to cover their mouth and nose with a tissue, move away from others and perform hand hygiene as soon as possible
- The employee should try to maintain a distance of two metres from an ill client
- Employees should practice regular hand hygiene

For federal employees that provide health care to suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19

Follow the infection prevention and control guidance provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada [COVID-19 for health professionals](#) and the [interim guidance for acute healthcare facilities](#) where applicable.

Contact Information

If there are any questions or concerns regarding this advisory and/or your present health status, please consult with the occupational health and safety resource personnel within your department or agency.

Annexes and other Guidance Documents

Given that federal employees of the core public administration work in a variety of settings domestically and internationally, this General Advisory is supplemented by annexes with information and recommendations pertaining to specific places of work. Annexes completed to date are as follows:

- Annex A: Advice for Federal Employees at Points of Entry in Canada
- Annex B: Advice for Canada-Based Staff at Missions Abroad
- Annex C: Advice for Canada-Based Staff in Wuhan Supporting Flights for Repatriation of Canadians
- Annex D: Personal Protective Equipment Guidance for Federal Employees: On-Site Support in Trenton for Repatriation of Canadians from Wuhan
- Annex E: Advice for Canada-Based Staff in Japan Supporting Flight for Repatriation of Canadians Onboard the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship
- Annex F: Personal Protective Equipment Guidance for Federal Employees: On-Site Support in Trenton and Cornwall for Repatriation of Canadians from Diamond Princess Cruise Ship in Japan
- Annex G: Advice for Canada-Based Staff at the Embassy of Canada to Japan
- Annex I: Advice for Canada-Based Staff in San Francisco Supporting Flight for Repatriation of Canadians Onboard the Grand Princess Cruise Ship
- Annex J: Personal Protective Equipment Guidance for Federal Employees: On-Site Support in Trenton for the Repatriation of Canadians from Grand Princess Cruise Ship in San Francisco

Please note that annexes C, D, E, F and I are no longer in effect and have been archived.

Additional Advice

As the situation evolves, the general advisory and any guidance documents will be updated as required.

Scope

PSOHP is responsible for federal departments in Schedule I and IV of the Financial Administration Act and as such has prepared this advice for its client departments.

However, it may be appropriate for other federal departments outside of Schedule I and IV to consider these recommendations for their federally regulated workplace. Individual departments will need to determine which recommendations apply to their occupational health needs.

Additionally, to assist federal departments in meeting their obligations under Part II of the Canada Labour Code please refer to the following webpage on coronavirus and occupational health and safety: www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development.

Frequently Asked Questions

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) have also been prepared and can be found at:

- [GCintranet](#) (accessible only from a Government of Canada device)
- Government of Canada. Canada.ca/coronavirus

Sources of Information:

Government of Canada. *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Outbreak update.* [Canada.ca/coronavirus](https://www.canada.ca/coronavirus)

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. *Flu and Infectious Disease Outbreaks.* <https://www.ccohs.ca/outbreaks/>

Employment and Social Development Canada. *Notice: Coronavirus and occupational health and safety.* <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-socialdevelopment/corporate/notices/coronavirus-occupational-health-safety.html>

Government of Canada. *Canada Labour Code, Part II.* <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/L-2/>

Government of Canada. *COVID-19: Being prepared.* <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/being-prepared.html>

Government of Canada. *Community-based measures to mitigate the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Canada.* <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/public-health-measures-mitigate-covid-19.html>

Government of Canada. *COVID-19: Travel Advice.* <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/latest-travel-health-advice>

Government of Canada. *COVID-19 List of Affected Areas.* <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/covid-19-affected-areas-list.html>

World Health Organization. *Novel Coronavirus.* <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/emergencies/novel-coronavirus>

World Health Organization. *Q&A on coronaviruses.* <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>

World Health Organization. *Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19.* <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>