

A guide to understanding how to support your business and workforce through a global health emergency. This factsheet is based on information available at the time and is subject to changing information and laws. The applicability of information may vary by workplace risk and other factors for employees and customers.

Introduction

The new coronavirus disease, now officially named COVID-19, was declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization in January 2020. Since then, it has spread to Canada, with roughly 2,000 Canadians having contracted the virus – mostly through travel outside of the county, although local cases are becoming more popular by the day.

This has led to major disruptions in the Canadian economy due to the Canadian border being closed to all non-essential travel, gatherings being limited to less than 50 people, many businesses closing their doors and many employees being forced to work from home. This poses 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 fever, coughing, and difficulty in breathing.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has assessed the public health risk associated with COVID-19 as high for Canada, due to the increasing number of cases in Canada. Public health risk is continually reassessed as new information becomes available.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared in a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. 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.

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 an area or have not been in close contact with someone who has and is feeling unwell, your chances of getting it is still relatively low. However, the virus can live on surfaces for up to 10 days so being aware of if you have been exposed can be very difficult.

Persons who believe they have come into contact with the virus should monitor how they feel, watch for symptoms and stay home in quarantine for a minimum of 14 days. Anyone who has traveled outside of Canada must self isolate for a minimum of 14 days as well. There is no specific antiviral treatment recommended for COVID-19 infection.

The [BC Centre for Disease Control](#) (BCCDC) says to call your health-care provider or 1-888-COVID19 (1-888-268-4319), the province's new dedicated coronavirus hotline, if you believe you have symptoms and have been in contact with someone who is known to have the illness. The same applies if you have symptoms and have returned from — or been in contact with someone who has returned from — an area with widespread community transmission of the illness. The BCCDC says: "If you have no symptoms, mild symptoms or you are a returning traveller self-isolating at home, you do not require a test." [You can also use B.C.'s new online assessment tool.](#)

Most cases of COVID-19 are mild or moderate and require the person to rest, possibly take over the counter medications to relieve symptoms and avoid contact with anyone to prevent the spread of this highly contagious virus. Avoiding contact with others is the most important step in defeating COVID-19.

Proper planning can help protect both your employees, the general public and your business.

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. These people are required by law to self isolate for a minimum of 14 days. People's health and well-being, and measures to prevent the virus from spreading should be at the heart of every employer's response.

A State of Emergency has taken place in most Canadian provinces, territories and a lot of major Canadian cities, such as, Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. This means there will be disruptions with distributors, suppliers and customers. Other areas the virus has impacted include, public transport and large social gatherings 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 [BCCDC](#), [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 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.

- **Conduct a Business Impact Analysis:** Your process should identify, categorize and prioritize critical functions and processes, as well as required resources, personnel and equipment required to carry out those functions.
- **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 but also need to balance this with protections of the infected or suspected infected individuals under the Human Right Legislation.

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. And, employees should work from home as much as possible to avoid spreading the virus.

Wider Health and Well-being Concerns

- Keep up to date and follow official medical advice as it's updated. Reassure employees if they have unfounded 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 travel. 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 applied to COVID-19 scenarios. 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, travel. It's important to strike the balance between your organization and its people being prepared for the spread of the virus whilst discouraging irrational panic with relevant information. 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 and refer them to government sources of information.
- If the virus continues to spread widely 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 may have as an employer to these specific groups of employees.
- Follow applicable privacy laws if one of your employees have been affected.

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.
- Ensure your remote work policies are up to date and clearly communicated to your employees. Include cyber and privacy risks as part of your communication.
- 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, along with related overtime pay obligations.
- 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.

Closing Thoughts

We hope you have found the information in this document helpful to both your organization and your HR and business practices. We will be updating this document as the situation evolves so please bookmark this page and check back regularly.

Below is a list of resources you may find helpful.

Useful Resources

- [B.C. COVID-19 Symptom Self-Assessment Tool](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Government of Canada – Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\): Outbreak update](#)
- [Government of Canada, Public Health Agency](#)
- [Government of Canada, Awareness Resources](#)
- [Government of Canada, Travel Notices](#)
- [World Health Organization – Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)
- [World Health Organization – Getting your Workplace Ready for COVID-19](#)

B.C. Specific Links

- [B.C. Centre for Disease Control – Novel coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [B.C. Government – Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [HealthLink B.C. – Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) information page](#)
- [Vancouver Coastal Health – Information on Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\)](#)

Partners Links

- [Canadian Payroll Association – Payroll and COVID-19](#)
- [CRHA’s COVID-19 - Information and Recommendations for Employers and Workers](#)

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