

WORKING DURING COVID-19

Employers and employees need to take steps to help staff and clients stay healthy and prevent spread of COVID-19. Learn more about working during COVID-19.

Employers and employees need to take steps to help staff and clients stay healthy and prevent spread of COVID-19. You should also know what to do if you have safety concerns.

What the Health Protection Act order means for your business

Under the Health Protection Act order, some businesses are required to close. Others can stay open with restrictions. Make sure your business is [following all public health orders](#).

Making your workplace safer

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it's especially important to take steps to stay safe at work. Employers and employees need to work together to assess health and safety risks and reduce them.

The COVID-19 virus is spread by contact with an infected person or with a contaminated surface or object. The best ways to protect yourself and others from the virus are:

- washing your hands frequently
- cleaning frequently touched surfaces frequently
- practising safe physical distancing whenever possible

Assess the hazards

Assessing hazards means taking a careful look at what could harm workers in the workplace. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this includes:

- addressing the risk of exposure and how to control it
- assessing how your workplace will be affected if some of your staff are absent

During a pandemic, you must do a review to identify the potential for exposure. This includes:

- reviewing tasks and jobs to determine who is at the greatest risk of exposure and when the exposure is most likely to happen
- looking again at previous hazard assessments to identify areas where the risk of exposure is greatest

- reviewing the hazard assessment, identifying new hazards, and introducing controls as needed
- reviewing and identifying potential staff shortages and how they affect operational and critical safety activities

How you can reduce risks

Consult with your Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee or Safety Representative to discuss what you could do to reduce risk, and how effective each action would be. You should also consider any recommendations or Orders from the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

Eliminating hazards

Whenever possible, hazards should be eliminated. You could do this by eliminating any activity that isn't essential or can be delayed until the threat of viral exposure is reduced or resolved. This may be difficult, but you must do whatever is reasonably practical to reduce the risk.

Engineering controls

Engineering controls either remove a hazard or provide a barrier between the worker and the hazard. Examples of engineering controls to reduce the risk of catching or spready viruses include:

- physical barriers to isolate, such as installing Plexiglas or other form of enclosure
- facility, room, and workstation design, focusing on increased spatial separation
- human traffic patterns (limiting areas where people gather or frequent)
- positioning of alcohol-based hand sanitizer dispensers
- positioning of dedicated hand washing sinks
- process automation to reduce contact with surfaces (like automated hand-washing dispensers, automated hand drying, automatic doors, etc.)
- ventilation
 - make sure ventilation systems are working properly
 - increase ventilation rates for makeup air, supply air, and exhaust systems
 - increase the percentage of fresh clean air that circulates into the system
 - change filters in ventilation systems more frequently
 - develop operations and maintenance procedures to clean, maintain, and operate ventilation systems including protection for maintenance staff

Administrative controls

Administrative controls may be used in combination to protect and reduce workplace exposures. Administrative controls can include training, hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, social distancing, alternate work arrangements, workplace cleaning, restricting workplace entry, and promotion of a vaccine when available.

Additional considerations for reducing risk of exposure include:

- revising work schedules to reduce the number of employees assigned to a given shift
- reducing close contact with customers or co-workers through the increased use of, fax, telephone, and e-mail communication
- postponing business activities that require personal interaction with customers
- creating a buffer zone of at least 2 metres between an employee and a customer when customer service must be done in person and keeping meetings as short as possible
- making accommodations for staff to work from home wherever possible
- assigning high-risk workers (like people who are immuno-compromised, over 60 years of age or pregnant) to job tasks with lower risk of exposure
- avoiding locations or activities that may represent a high risk of exposure
- increasing workplace cleaning, providing the necessary supplies, and reinforcing personal hygiene measures
- providing clean hand washing facilities
- offering alcohol-based hand sanitizers when regular facilities are not available (or to workers working on the road, on construction sites, etc.)
- regularly cleaning objects that are touched frequently, such as workstations, doorknobs, handles, railings, kettles, tools, etc. with disinfectants or soap and water
- providing boxes of tissues and ensuring safe and sanitary disposal of used tissues
- removing magazines and papers from waiting areas or common rooms (like staff break rooms)
- washing work clothing more frequently, including hard hat liners, gloves, and coveralls.

Personal protective equipment

Personal protective equipment (PPE) reduces risks and hazards to the worker. Personal protective equipment can include gloves, eye protection, facemasks, clothing or respirators. This equipment may be required in some circumstances.

Employers must make sure workers are trained in the personal protective equipment they're expected to use, and that the equipment is maintained and in good condition to perform the functions it was designed for.

Respirators, if required, must be approved by a standard's setting organization and must be fit-tested. You should be aware of the difference between a surgical or procedure mask and a respirator. Surgical masks are not certified to prevent inhalation of small droplets or particles. Respirators are certified when they're properly fit-tested.

Employee training

Workers may be asked to do unfamiliar job tasks which may require job specific training. All employees with potential occupational exposure should be trained on:

- the hazards associated with exposure, the potential ways of contracting the virus, and control measures to break the chain of infection
- the protocols in place to isolate and report cases or reduce exposure
- awareness of social distancing strategies-keeping a distance of 2 metres
- appropriate control measures, such as cough etiquette (covering the nose and mouth while coughing or sneezing, coughing or sneezing into the bend of the elbow or into a tissue), and hand hygiene (washing hands or using alcohol based hand rub if soap and water are not available) to prevent transmission
- use and care of personal protective equipment

Other advice for businesses and community groups

There are other steps businesses and community groups can take to help people stay safe.

Support your employees if they need to stay home

Anyone who has travelled outside Nova Scotia is required to self-isolate for 14 days from the day they get back to the province, even if they don't have symptoms.

Employers can't require a doctor's note if an employee needs to be off work.

Consider how you can support your employees while they're in self-isolation. Talk with your employees about flexible hours or alternative work arrangements if they are required to stay home.

Limit event size

Businesses and community groups are required to limit events and social gatherings to no more than 5 people. This could include events like weddings, religious services, movie screenings and concerts. This will help protect vulnerable Nova Scotians who are at risk for serious illness.

Other steps you can take in your workplace

As well as following the [coronavirus prevention advice for individuals and families](#), businesses and community groups should:

- make sure you have a business continuity or emergency plan in place
- think about what you'll do if several of your employees get sick
- post handwashing signs and provide alcohol-based hand rub to encourage frequent hand hygiene
- make sure spaces and surfaces are cleaned
- remove non-essential items like magazines, stuffed toys, and other items that can't be easily cleaned from reception areas

Safety tips for trades workers

People working in trades may have special concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency has a [COVID-19 tip sheet for trades workers](#) with more information on how to keep yourself safe.

If you have concerns about working during COVID-19

If you're an employer or employee and you have questions or concerns about work during COVID-19, contact the Department of Labour and Advanced Education for help.

Safety concerns

Workplaces are required to take precautions to ensure the health and safety of their employees and clients. If you're worried about safety in the workplace, you should talk to your immediate supervisor. If the situation isn't resolved, contact your Occupational Health and Safety Committee if you have one, or call the Safety Branch at [1-800-952-2687](tel:1-800-952-2687).

If you're a business owner or manager and you want workplace safety advice, call the Safety Branch at [1-800-952-2687](tel:1-800-952-2687).

Leaves, layoffs and other labour questions

If you have questions about the Labour Code, like taking leave or being laid off, contact the Labour Standards Division at [1-888-315-0110](tel:1-888-315-0110).

Government of Canada preventing COVID-19 in the workplace
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/preventing-covid-19-workplace-employers-employees-essential-service-workers.html>

Government of Canada risk-informed decision-making guidelines for workplaces and businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/risk-informed-decision-making-workplaces-businesses-covid-19-pandemic.html>

Government of Canada hard surface disinfectants, hygiene and hand sanitizers (COVID-19)
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19.html>

Canadian Centre of Occupational Health and Safety coronavirus
<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/coronavirus.html>