

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDANCE FOR WORKERS: RESPIRATORY VIRUSES

This bulletin gives a brief overview of respiratory virus and occupational health and safety (OHS) for workers. You can also find links to more information on specific OHS topics on page three.

Key information

Alberta's *OHS Act* defines fundamental rights and responsibilities for work site parties. For workers, these include the:

- right to know,
- right to participate,
- right to refuse dangerous work, and
- responsibility to work safely and ensure the safety of themselves and others.

Alberta's OHS legislation

The *OHS Act* sets minimum standards to protect and promote the health and safety of workers throughout Alberta. OHS legislation also includes regulations made under the *OHS Act*. These regulations (including the OHS Code) set specific rules and work together with the *OHS Act*.

Alberta's OHS legislation applies to most workers and employers in Alberta, including domestic workers. The legislation does not apply if you are:

- Under federal jurisdiction (for example, Canadian chartered banks, interprovincial transportation, aviation).
- A farm and ranch operations owner, family member of the owner or non-waged individual.

If you are a waged, non-family farm and ranch worker, you are covered by the basic safety standards set out in the *OHS Act* only.

Know about health and safety

You have the right to know about workplace hazards and have access to health and safety information at the work site.

Your employer has the responsibility to make you aware of your rights and duties under OHS legislation and make sure you have the skills and training to do your work safely. Your employer must also provide you information about hazards at the work site, controls

used to eliminate or control the hazards, and any relevant work practices and procedures.

Hazard controls at your workplace

As with any hazard, an employer must assess and control the hazard of respiratory viruses in the workplace. Employers must repeat the hazard assessment when there are changes to the working conditions or work process to ensure any new or potential hazards are considered and controlled. An employer must involve affected workers in the hazard assessment, and the control or elimination of the hazards identified.

OHS laws require employers to ensure workers have the training they need to work safely. This includes training on new policies, procedures and equipment related to respiratory viruses.

Practices that minimize the transmission of viral infection are workplace-specific. Depending on the type of work you do and your work site, you might see:

- Floor plans, workstations and/or physical barriers that allow for physical distancing.
- Rules (for visitors or customers) and safe work procedures (for workers) that support hand hygiene, enhanced cleaning and disinfection and physical distancing.
- Sick leave/absence policies that reduce infection risk.
- Staggered or adjusted shifts and breaks to reduce the number of workers in common areas at one time.
- Action plans that include pre-screening and contact tracing procedures to prevent and control outbreaks at the work site.
- Workplace rules or guidelines about wearing masks.

Participate in health and safety

You have the right to meaningful participation in health and safety activities related to your work and the work site. Your employer is required to respond to health and safety issues raised by workers.

Your workplace may have a health and safety committee (HSC) or health and safety (HS) representative. They bring work site parties together to work on activities such as preventing, identifying and controlling hazards, investigating health and safety

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incidents, and responding to health and safety concerns at the work site.

If your workplace does not have an HSC or HS representative, your employer must still involve affected workers when assessing hazards at the workplace and implementing control measures.

Refuse dangerous work

Workers have the right to refuse dangerous work if they have reasonable grounds to believe that there is a dangerous condition at the work site, or that the work is dangerous to them or any other person.

Health and safety hazards that are not normal for the job, or normal hazards that are not properly controlled, are considered dangerous conditions that could trigger a work refusal. A dangerous condition is a risk that directly threatens the health and safety of a worker.

Theoretical, anticipated or potential risks are not reasonable grounds for a work refusal – you should bring these to your employer’s attention under the worker’s general duty of reporting an unsafe or harmful act or condition.

If your employer has implemented reasonable controls to address the risk of respiratory viruses, the associated dangerous condition should be addressed. It’s unlikely that there will be a dangerous condition under OHS legislation.

If you still feel uncomfortable with those controls, you are encouraged to discuss your concerns with your employer.

Employers and workers working together can resolve most concerns without a work refusal. However, if you are in a situation where you feel it is necessary to refuse work, make sure you follow the work refusal steps set out in the law – including promptly reporting the refusal and the reasons for it to your employer, supervisor or another designated person. The steps of the work refusal process that both you and your employer must follow usually result in issue resolution. If this isn’t the case, you can contact OHS for more information and/or notify OHS of your concerns.

Refusing unsafe work does not entitle a worker to abandon the work site or refuse other work. Your employer may give you other job duties until the dangerous condition is remedied.

Your responsibilities

OHS legislation is based on the internal responsibility system, which says that everyone – including workers – is accountable for workplace health and safety, each according to their authority and level of control. As a worker, your obligations include:

- Cooperating with your employer or supervisor by following the health and safety rules.
- Reporting concerns about unsafe or harmful work sites or work site conditions to your employer or supervisor.
- Cooperating with any person following the OHS legislation and following the OHS legislation yourself.

COVID-19 INFORMATION

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Contact us

OHS Contact Centre

Concerns, questions, reporting serious incidents

Anywhere in Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Edmonton & surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Deaf or hearing impaired

- 1-800-232-7215 (Alberta)
- 780-427-9999 (Edmonton)

Notify OHS of health and safety concerns online

ohsComplaintsPortal.labour.alberta.ca

Online incident reporting

Potentially serious, mine or mine site incidents

oir.labour.alberta.ca

OHS website

alberta.ca/ohs

For more information

Hazard assessment and control: a handbook for Alberta employers and workers (BP018)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp018

Health and safety committees and representatives (LI060)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li060

Respiratory viruses and the workplace (BP022)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bh022

Right to refuse dangerous work (LI049)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li049

Worker's guide to occupational health and safety (LI008)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li008

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