

COVID-19 INFORMATION

RESPIRATORY VIRUS EXPOSURE IN WORKPLACE COMMON AREAS

The risk of respiratory virus exposure can increase when controls fail in workplace common areas. Common areas include:

- lunchrooms/break rooms
- smoking areas
- hallways
- washrooms
- locker rooms
- parking lots
- time clocks
- elevators

This bulletin discusses the increased risk and some best practices to address this risk.

Key information

- Employers must assess a work site for hazards.
- When a hazard cannot be eliminated, it must be controlled.
- Supervisors are responsible for ensuring workers use all hazard controls and wear required personal protective equipment.

Respiratory virus exposure in common areas can increase:

- when rules, procedures and guidance related to respiratory virus protection are not followed
- when a control is removed (e.g. removing a mask to eat, smoke or change clothes)
- when cleaning and disinfecting protocols are inadequate

Hazard assessment and control

Employers must ensure, as far as reasonably possible, the health and safety of workers and others at or around their work site. This includes performing a hazard assessment to identify existing and potential hazards at a work site.

When performing a hazard assessment in a common area, consider things like:

- the size of the area and the number of people using the area
- how people move through the area
- high touch surfaces

When a hazard cannot be eliminated, it needs to be controlled. There is a hierarchy of controls that must be followed:

- first choice – engineering controls (e.g. plexiglass barriers, vaccination)
- second choice – administrative controls (e.g. staggering break times)
- third choice – personal protective equipment (PPE) (e.g. gloves, face shields, respirators)

Employers may need a combination of engineering and administrative controls and PPE to protect workers adequately.

Supervisors are responsible for ensuring workers use all hazard controls and wear required PPE.

To learn more, read [Respiratory viruses and the workplace](#) and [Hazard assessment and control: A handbook for Alberta employers and workers](#).

Reduce the risk

To reduce the risk of respiratory virus exposure, consider the following practices:

- aid physical separation through barriers (plexiglass), signage, floor markings and traffic flow controls to limit the number of people in one space
- stagger worker arrival/departure times, lunchtimes, breaks and meetings to minimize the number of workers in one place at the same time (e.g. parking lots, locker rooms and near time clocks)

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- reduce worker movement and restrict common area access by assigning workers specific break areas (e.g. lunchrooms)
- reduce or remove seats from lunchrooms and common areas
- remove shared items such as dishes and cutlery and difficult-to-clean items such as newspapers or magazines
- if workers need certain common areas (such as a prayer room) at a particular time, consider designating space to maintain physical distancing
- increase cleaning and disinfection frequency of high traffic areas, common areas, washrooms and shower facilities
- designate lockers and storage spaces for each worker
- post reminders in common areas about physical distancing, mask requirements and hand hygiene
- action plans that include pre-screening and contact tracing procedures to prevent and control outbreaks at the work site

For more information

Hazard assessment and control: A handbook for Alberta employers and workers (BP018)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp018

OHS guidance for workers: respiratory viruses (COVID19-14)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/covid19-14

Respiratory viruses in the workplace (BP022)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bh022

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

alberta.ca/file-complaint-online.aspx

Online incident reporting

Potentially serious, mine or mine site incidents

oir.labour.alberta.ca

OHS website

alberta.ca/ohs

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