

Respiratory viruses and the workplace

OHS information for employers, supervisors and workers

This bulletin gives employers, supervisors and workers information about minimizing risk from respiratory viruses in the workplace.

Key information

- Follow best practices in your workplace, including handwashing, physical distancing, staying home from work and getting medical attention if you don't feel well.
- Monitor public health alerts and follow advisories.

Respiratory viruses

A number of different respiratory viruses can make people sick in the workplace. These include viruses that circulate in the population regularly, such as seasonal influenza, and new or emerging respiratory viruses. Of these, new viruses are generally only a public health concern if they can make people very sick. For example, new strains of the coronavirus family – some of which cause nothing more than the common cold – also include SARS-CoV, which led to the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, and COVID-19.

Viral transmission

Cold and flu season typically runs from November to April in Alberta. While you can pick up a respiratory virus any time, it is more common in colder weather.

Outbreaks of new respiratory viruses can happen in any season. Most of the time, these start in other parts of the world – often, from animal viruses that have mutated first so that they can infect people,

and then further mutate to spread from person to person. The new viruses spread across regions and internationally when infected individuals travel.

Respiratory viruses can spread either directly or indirectly.

- Direct infection can happen if:
 - someone coughs or sneezes on you, or
 - you shake hands with someone who is sick and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Indirect spread can happen from contaminated surfaces, tissues, cloth or paper.

Where to get more information

You can find more about seasonal influenza and other regularly circulating viruses at:

- alberta.ca/influenza-the-flu.aspx
- myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/influenza-symptoms-faqs.aspx
- albertahealthservices.ca/assets/heal/heal-handout-common-cold.pdf
- ipac-canada.org/influenza-resources.php (includes information on both seasonal and pandemic influenza)

You can get information on new and emerging respiratory viruses at:

- ipac-canada.org/coronavirus-resources.php
- canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html

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OHS legal requirements and infection prevention

Alberta occupational health and safety (OHS) legislation includes a number of provisions that can apply when respiratory viruses are in the workplace. Some of these are included below.

Alberta OHS enforces workplace health and safety legislation. If you have questions about OHS legislation, call the OHS Contact Centre at 1-866-415-8690.

General duty

Employers, supervisors and workers have general responsibilities under the *OHS Act*.

- Employers must ensure, as far as reasonably possible, the health and safety of workers and others at or around their work site.
- Supervisors must protect, as far as reasonably possible, the health and safety of workers they supervise.
- Workers must take reasonable care and cooperate with the employer to ensure the health and safety of themselves and others at the work site.

For more on employer and worker obligations, read the [Employer's guide to occupational health and safety](#) and [Worker's guide to occupational health and safety](#).

Hazard assessment and control

Employers must perform a hazard assessment to identify existing and potential hazards at a work site. Part 2 of the OHS Code outlines minimum hazard assessment requirements. Eliminate a hazard wherever you can. When elimination is not possible or reasonable, it must be controlled. There is a hierarchy of controls that must be followed.

- First choice: engineering controls. These control a hazard at the source. Depending on the workplace and processes, examples might include vaccinations, ventilation systems or physical barriers, such as plexiglass.

- Second choice: administrative controls. These change the way people work. Examples include worker training or hand hygiene, physical distancing, alternate work arrangement or regular workplace cleaning policies.
- Third choice is personal protective equipment (PPE), which controls the hazard at the worker. PPE examples can include gloves, eye protection, facemasks or respirators.
 - Employers must ensure that workers are trained in the PPE they are expected to use, and that PPE is maintained and in good condition to perform the functions for which it was designed.
 - PPE has to meet OHS Code Part 18 requirements. For instance, respirators must be approved by a standards setting organization acceptable by the Alberta OHS Director of Occupational Hygiene.
 - If a respirator is required and depends on a facial seal to work effectively, the worker must be fit-tested. The worker must be clean-shaven where the respirator seals to the skin of the face.

For more information on respiratory protective equipment, read the publications [Development of a Code of Practice for Respiratory Protective Equipment](#) and [Respiratory Protective Equipment: an Employer's Guide](#).

Employers may need a mix of engineering and administrative controls and PPE to protect workers. Effective controls for workplace hazards depend on site and task-specific factors. For instance, at work sites where workers have a high risk of exposure to infectious droplets and/or airborne hazards – such as health care settings – respirators may be part of the control mix. Other work environments may not require the same type of controls for hazards associated with a respiratory virus. Employers need to do a risk assessment to determine what controls would be most appropriate at their specific work site.

In all cases, employers must evaluate the effectiveness of their control measures, and review and revise hazard assessments as needed, to prevent the development of unsafe or unhealthy working conditions.

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For more information on hazard assessment, read [Hazard Assessment and Control: a handbook for Alberta employers and workers](https://open.alberta.ca/publications/bh022-respiratory-viruses-and-the-workplace).

Special considerations apply for health care workers and others who work in a health care setting. These workers should seek additional direction from their employers. Employers are responsible for ensuring protection of workers, which includes protection from biological hazards such as respiratory viruses.

First aid and emergency preparedness

In case ill workers come to work, employers should consider whether first aid services are adequate to look after ill workers. In an outbreak, employers may need to review their first aid and emergency response plans to ensure that they are appropriate.

Best practices

Best practices can be an important part of your control of respiratory virus hazards in the workplace.

Note that best practices continuously evolve and improve – make sure that you have current advice from expert sources in choosing what practices you follow.

Business continuity

Employers should review and identify operational areas that may be vulnerable to staff absenteeism, if workers are sick or need to stay home to take care of sick family members.

Questions to ask in relation to potential respiratory virus hazards may include:

- Who can be exposed to respiratory viruses in the workplace? Think about workers who interact regularly with sick patients, crowds, children, travellers or other members of the public.
- What job tasks increase potential exposure to respiratory viruses in the workplace (for example, aerosol generating medical procedures)?
- How often are workers potentially exposed?

Employers may need to consider other potential hazards. Examples include:

- Stress, for instance from fear of illness, concern for sick family members or changed job roles due to absent co-workers.
- Fatigue, for example if workers have to put in extra hours.
- Changes in working conditions related to increased or different workloads.

There are options for employers to explore. These can include:

- Alternative working arrangements such as telework.
- Teleconferences or virtual meetings instead of in-person meetings.
- Using mail, fax, telephone or email communication to help decrease in-person contact with co-workers or customers.

Personal care

Good hand hygiene is important. Washing hands with soap and water can prevent the spread of respiratory viruses. Using a hand sanitizer with at least 60 per cent alcohol can also be effective.

Physical distancing means staying more than two metres from others, whether or not they show any signs of illness, such as coughing or sneezing. Cough or sneeze droplets that can spread respiratory viruses tend to travel less than two metres.

Keep hands away from your mouth, nose and eyes to avoid bringing respiratory viruses into contact with mucous membranes, where they enter the body.

Consider staying home from work if you feel sick. Call Health Link Alberta (811 or 1-866-408-5465) if you have questions about your health.

There are vaccinations for some respiratory viruses, such as seasonal influenza and COVID-19 virus. If you don't have any contraindications, consider protecting yourself by getting vaccinated.

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Workplace hygiene

Good workplace hygiene practices can also be important in controlling the spread of respiratory viruses in the workplace.

- Clean surfaces that are frequently touched with hands.
- Clean shared workstations and equipment when individuals are changing workstations.
- If possible, discourage workers from sharing phones, desks, offices or other work tools and equipment.

In an outbreak

Employers, supervisors and workers should check and follow all advice provided by public health officials. Travel advisories may affect workers who are planning to travel for work purposes.

If there is an outbreak, reputable information sources include:

- Alberta Health
- Alberta Health Services
- Public Health Agency of Canada
- World Health Organization

If isolation measures have been adopted in an outbreak, employers may need to set up a process for ensuring that ill workers have completed any required isolation, as directed by health authorities.

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 Reporting Service

PSIs, mine or mine site incidents
psi.labour.alberta.ca

For more information

Alberta Health

alberta.ca/health.aspx

Alberta Health: Infection prevention and control

alberta.ca/infection-prevention-and-control.aspx

Alberta Health Services active health advisories (health advisories for physicians, healthcare workers and the public)

albertahealthservices.ca/news/Page1926.aspx

Health Link (web resources from Alberta's 24/7 non-emergency health advice service)

albertahealthservices.ca/assets/healthinfo/link/index.html

Public Health Agency of Canada

canada.ca/en/public-health.html

World Health Organization

who.int

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