

# Respiratory viruses and the workplace

## OHS information for employers, supervisors and workers

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

### KEY INFORMATION

- Employers, supervisors and workers should follow best practices, including handwashing, physical distancing, staying home from work and getting medical attention if you don't feel well.
- Employers must assess the risk of exposure to respiratory viruses in job tasks and put appropriate controls in place.
- As applicable, monitor public health alerts and follow advisories.

## Respiratory viruses

A number of different respiratory viruses can make people sick in the workplace. Some viruses circulate in the population regularly, such as seasonal influenza. New and emerging respiratory viruses can also appear. For example, new strains of the coronavirus family – some of which cause nothing more than the common cold – also include SARS-CoV1, which led to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) 2003 outbreak, and SARS-CoV2, responsible for COVID-19.

### Seasonal transmission

There may be patterns of increased transmission of respiratory viruses at certain times. For example, cold and flu season typically runs from November to April in Alberta.

However, when a virus is new or when a new variant of an existing disease like COVID-19 or influenza appears, it is harder to predict times of increased transmission. Outbreaks of new respiratory viruses can happen in any season.

### How respiratory viruses spread

Respiratory viruses can spread either directly or indirectly. This is generally true regardless of whether they are seasonal, or new/emerging viruses.

Direct infection can happen if someone coughs or sneezes on you, you breathe in air that has infectious aerosols, or

you shake hands with someone who is sick and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth.

Indirect spread can happen from contaminated surfaces (for example, tissues, cloth or paper).

The most contagious period for most respiratory viruses is for five to seven days beginning from the start of symptoms (for instance, coughing or sneezing). With some respiratory viruses, individuals can be infectious before they have symptoms, or infectious with no symptoms.

### Where to learn more

Reliable sources that provide information about seasonal influenza, COVID-19 and other regularly circulating or new viruses include Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, the Public Health Agency of Canada and the World Health Organization. See [For more information](#) for website details.

Alberta Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) enforces workplace health and safety laws. If you have questions about occupational health and safety laws, call the OHS Contact Centre at 1-866-415-8690.

## OHS legal requirements and infection prevention

Alberta occupational health and safety laws include a number of provisions that apply when respiratory viruses are in the workplace. Some of these are introduced below.

### Assessing respiratory virus hazards

Employers must perform a hazard assessment to identify existing and potential hazards – including respiratory viruses – at a work site. They must also eliminate or control any identified hazards. Part 2 of the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Code outlines minimum hazard assessment requirements.

In assessing the potential exposure to respiratory viruses in the workplace, employers should consider factors such as:

- The size and layout of the workspace.

- The infectiousness of potential respiratory viruses which may be present.
- Workers' ability to limit exposure to sick individuals in the course of their job tasks.
- How often workers are exposed to coworkers, clients/customers and members of the public, or contaminated surfaces.

See [Table 1](#) for some general guidelines about exposure level. Hazard assessment must be work site specific. Employers need to do a hazard assessment to determine what controls would be most appropriate at their specific work site.

**TABLE 1: EXPOSURE LEVEL EXAMPLES**

Exposure level	Examples
Minimal exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workers working alone outdoors or in well-ventilated indoor environments with no or minimal contact with others.</li> </ul>
Lower exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workers who may be exposed to others from time to time in relatively large, well-ventilated workspaces.</li> <li>• Workers whose job tasks do not require close contact to another individual, where physical distancing can be maintained.</li> </ul>
Higher exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workers who work with sick individuals.</li> <li>• Workers who work in small, poorly ventilated workspaces with frequent close contact with multiple co-workers or members of the public.</li> </ul>

### Controlling respiratory virus hazards

Employers must eliminate a hazard wherever they can. When elimination is not reasonably practicable, it must be controlled. There is a hierarchy of controls that employers must follow:

- First choice: engineering controls. These control a hazard at the source.
- Second choice: administrative controls. These change the way people work.
- Third choice is personal protective equipment (PPE), which controls the hazard at the worker.

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

[Table 2](#) gives some examples of different control types that may apply to respiratory viruses – but it's critical to note that 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.

**TABLE 2: SAMPLE RESPIRATORY VIRUS CONTROLS**

Control type	Examples (Selection depends on work site hazard assessment)
Engineering control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ventilation systems.</li> <li>• Physical barriers, such as plexiglass.</li> </ul>
Administrative control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worker training.</li> <li>• Hand hygiene practices.</li> <li>• Physical distancing.</li> <li>• Alternate work arrangements.</li> <li>• Regular workplace cleaning policies.</li> </ul>
PPE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eye protection.</li> <li>• Respirators.</li> <li>• Facemasks.</li> <li>• Gloves.</li> </ul>

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. They must involve affected workers in hazard assessment, and the control or elimination of the identified hazards.

If there are potential concerns related to controls for respiratory viruses at a work site (for example, reactions to cleaners or disinfectants), the employer must additionally address and control any additional hazards identified.

Learn more in [Hazard Assessment and Control: a handbook for Alberta employers and workers](#).

### Personal protective equipment

- The employer's hazard assessment will determine what PPE is required. PPE that is selected as a control must also be used appropriately. For example, if gloves are a control, this does not replace the need for hand washing.
- 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, if a respirator is required for certain respiratory viruses:
  - Respirators must be approved by a standards setting organization acceptable to an OHS director.
  - If a respirator 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.

Employers and supervisors share a responsibility to ensure workers use or wear equipment or PPE required by occupational health and safety law. Workers must use and wear all PPE that is required in relation to their work.

For more on respirator requirements, read [Respiratory Protective Equipment: an Employer's Guide](#). To learn more about the differences between respirators and masks, read [Respiratory viruses: selecting masks and respirators](#).

### 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. Employers should prepare for a pandemic virus as a potential biological hazard, and as part of emergency planning.

Learn more in [Emergency response planning: an occupational health and safety tool kit](#).

### Worker training

Employers have a general duty to ensure workers have all the training they need to work in a healthy and safety manner. Employers must ensure, as much as reasonably practicable, that supervisors are competent and familiar with the occupational health and safety laws that apply to the work done on site. Examples of this applied to respiratory virus control include that employers must:

- Provide workers and supervisors with up-to-date training on respiratory viruses, respiratory and hand hygiene practices, and other procedures to protect workers from respiratory viruses.
- Ensure workers and supervisors know where cleaning supplies and PPE are kept and how to access these.
  - If using chemical disinfectants, ensure compliance with Part 4 of the OHS Code and that workers and supervisors know where to find safety data sheets and other requirements related to the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS).

### Best practices

Best practices can be an important part of controlling 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.

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 that can increase flexibility in how and where workers get their work done. 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

Physical distancing means allowing space between people, whether or not they show any signs of illness. Depending on the work site and nature of the work being carried out, minimizing crowded situations or enabling workers to physically distance from each other can help decrease the risk of respiratory viruses.

Everyone in the workplace can help control viral spread by keeping their hands away from their mouth, nose and eyes. This avoids bringing respiratory viruses into contact with mucous membranes, where they enter the body.

Good hand hygiene is important. Washing hands with soap and water can prevent the spread of respiratory viruses. If hands are not visibly soiled, using a hand sanitizer with at least 60 per cent alcohol can also be effective.

### Precautionary principles

Individuals should stay home from work if sick. Employers can support workers to stay home by enacting supportive policies around sick leave and facilitating remote work arrangements (if a worker is well enough to work remotely and opts to do so).

### 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 (for example, instruments, doorknobs, keyboards, workstations, chairs). Cleaning may need to be enhanced at certain points of the day (for instance, enhanced cleaning of a break room after a coffee or lunch break).
- 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.
- Reassess routine business practices like shaking hands when making introductions or at the end of a meeting.

### Workplace meals and social activities

- Minimize use of shared utensils, tableware, cookware and towels in kitchens and break rooms.
- As possible according to the season and environmental conditions, plan outdoor social meals and social activities. If booking a restaurant gathering, ask about options for outdoor patio dining.

### Minimize crowding

- Stagger shift start and end times, as well as break times, to minimize crowding at entrances, exits and break rooms.
- Provide extra space in employer-arranged transportation to and from a work site, and allow workers to open windows for additional ventilation when feasible, according to environmental conditions.

### Vaccination

There are vaccinations for some respiratory illnesses, such as influenza virus and COVID-19. More information about vaccinations for influenza and COVID-19 is available at [myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/immunization-influenza.aspx](https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/immunization-influenza.aspx) and [alberta.ca/covid19-vaccine.aspx](https://alberta.ca/covid19-vaccine.aspx).

On-site workplace influenza and COVID-19 immunization clinics can make vaccination more convenient for workers who choose to be vaccinated.

### In an outbreak

Employers, supervisors and workers should check and follow all advice provided by public health officials. For example:

- Travel advisories may affect workers who are planning to travel for work purposes.
- If isolation measures have been adopted in an outbreak, employers must follow public health direction.
- In an outbreak, employers may need to review their first aid and emergency response plans to ensure that they are appropriate.

For more on responding to infectious disease outbreaks in certain settings, read [Outbreak Management: Infection Prevention and Control](#).

## Contact us

### OHS Contact Centre

Anywhere in Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Edmonton and surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Deaf or hard of hearing (TTY)

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

### Notify OHS of health and safety concerns

[alberta.ca/file-complaint-online.aspx](https://alberta.ca/file-complaint-online.aspx)

Call the OHS Contact Centre if you have concerns that involve immediate danger to a person on a work site.

### Report a workplace incident to OHS

[alberta.ca/ohs-complaints-incidents.aspx](https://alberta.ca/ohs-complaints-incidents.aspx)

### Website

[alberta.ca/ohs](https://alberta.ca/ohs)

## Get copies of the OHS Act, Regulation and Code

### Alberta King's Printer

[alberta.ca/alberta-kings-printer.aspx](https://alberta.ca/alberta-kings-printer.aspx)

### OHS

[alberta.ca/ohs-act-regulation-code.aspx](https://alberta.ca/ohs-act-regulation-code.aspx)

## For more information

Alberta Health

[alberta.ca/health.aspx](https://alberta.ca/health.aspx)

Alberta Health: Infection prevention and control

[alberta.ca/infection-prevention-and-control.aspx](https://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](https://albertahealthservices.ca/news/Page1926.aspx)

Alberta Health Services Outbreak Management: Infection Prevention and Control

[albertahealthservices.ca/ipc/Page6421.aspx](https://albertahealthservices.ca/ipc/Page6421.aspx)

Emergency response planning: an occupational health and safety tool kit (BH040)

[ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp040](https://ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp040)

Hazard Assessment and Control: a handbook for Alberta employers and workers (BP018)

[ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp018](https://ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp018)

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

[albertahealthservices.ca/assets/healthinfo/link/index.html](https://albertahealthservices.ca/assets/healthinfo/link/index.html)

Public Health Agency of Canada

[canada.ca/en/public-health.html](https://canada.ca/en/public-health.html)

Respiratory Protective Equipment: An Employer's Guide (PPE001)

[ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/ppe001](https://ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/ppe001)

Respiratory viruses: Selecting respirators and masks (PPE009)

[ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/ppe009](https://ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/ppe009)

World Health Organization

[who.int](https://who.int)

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