



HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDANCE DURING COVID-19 FOR COMMUNITY LABORATORY AND SPECIMEN COLLECTION CENTRES



OVERVIEW

This is not a legal document and employers are advised to seek legal advice.

A new type of coronavirus, abbreviated COVID-19, is causing an outbreak of respiratory (lung) disease. The severity of this illness can vary from person to person. There are, however, steps you can take to prevent the spread of infections and protect the health and safety of your employees. This document provides information to help you as your organization and business operates during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Employers have obligations to protect workers from hazards in the workplace as set out in the [Occupational Health and Safety Act \(OHS\)](#) and its Regulations and the directives coming from the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

Workers should raise any concerns to their:

- Supervisor
- Joint Health and Safety Committee/Health and Safety Representative

This will help ensure the employer has taken all reasonable precautions.

Ontario is currently in the midst of a [global pandemic](#). While the COVID-19 situation is changing daily, **the legislation and regulations in place to govern Ontario's workplaces remain in force.**

Under Ontario law, employers have the duty to take every reasonable precaution to protect workers from hazards in the workplace. Workers have the [right to refuse unsafe work](#). If health and safety concerns are not resolved internally, a worker can seek enforcement by filing a complaint with the ministry's Health and Safety Contact Centre at 1-877-202-0008. Failure of the employer to comply with the OHS and its Regulations could result in a [stop-work order](#) upon inspection by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD).



BEST PRACTICES TO KEEP YOUR WORKERS HEALTHY AND SAFE

The health and safety of workers is a top concern amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. During this time all stakeholders must place an increased focus on health and safety in order to keep community labs and specimen collection centres (SCC) open and safe.

All measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 should be done in compliance with requirements under the Occupational Health and Safety Act and associated Regulations and public health directives issued by the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

In addition, below are a set of resources, tips and best practices to help employers prevent the spread of COVID-19.

PROTECTING YOURSELF AND CO-WORKERS

Coronaviruses are spread through close contact, including at work. Here are some [helpful tips](#) to help prevent the spread of infection:

- [Wash your hands](#) often and thoroughly with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Sneeze and cough into your sleeve.
- If you use a tissue, discard immediately and wash your hands afterward.
- Avoid touching your face - eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home if you are sick.
- Avoid high-touch areas, where possible, or ensure you clean your hands after.
- Where possible, wear [gloves](#) when interacting with high-touch areas. Do not touch your face with gloved hands. Put on and remove gloves according to established processes. Ensure you wash your hands after removing gloves.
- Wash your clothes as soon as you get home.
- If you are ill: notify your supervisor immediately, complete the [self-assessment](#) and follow the instructions you get.

REPORTING ILLNESS

According to Health Canada, symptoms can appear in as little as a few days, or as long as 14 days after being exposed to someone with the disease. COVID-19 can cause a range of symptoms including fever, cough, sore throat and shortness of breath.

For some people, the symptoms are like having a cold; for others they are quite severe or even life-threatening. It is important to check with your healthcare provider and follow instructions about staying home or away from public spaces to prevent the spread of the virus.



The virus typically spreads through coughing and sneezing, personal contact with an infected person, or touching an infected surface and then the mouth, nose, or eyes.

Close contact with a potentially infected person or touching potentially contaminated items (such as tables, door handles, hard surfaces, etc.) are likely to pose the greatest exposure risks. Also, close contact with other people increases the risk of exposure to someone who may be infected.

At this time, it is recommended that any worker who is experiencing any symptoms related to cold, flu or COVID-19 should be sent home.

In addition, employers should advise these workers to immediately [self-isolate](#) and complete the online [self-assessment](#) on the Ontario COVID website or call either:

- [Telehealth](#): 1-866-797-0000
- their local Public Health unit
- their primary care provider (for example, family physician)

Asymptomatic workers who have travelled outside of Canada within the last 14 days and/or have had potential unprotected exposure to a person with COVID-19, and have been identified as [critical to continued operations](#), need to self-isolate when they are not at work. This work isolation requirement also applies to staff who have tested positive but symptoms have resolved.

Please note that additional resources, policies and procedures are being developed to provide further support in this area.

MINISTRY OF LABOUR, TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT (MLTSD) AND WORKPLACE SAFETY & INSURANCE BOARD REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Employers must report known positive test results for workers who may have contracted COVID-19 at work to:

- the MLTSD (in writing) within four days;
- the Joint Health and Safety Committee/Health and Safety Representative, and
- a trade union (if applicable)

For more information:

- [Occupational Illness: Requirements to Report to the MLTSD](#)
- [Occupational Illness: Infectious Disease Reporting Form](#)

Community labs and SCCs, to which the [Health Care and Residential Facilities Regulation \(O. Reg 67/93\)](#) applies, must ensure that the report contains all information outlined in Section 5 (5) of the regulation. Employers must also report occupationally-acquired infections to the [WSIB](#) within 72 hours of receiving notification of the illness.



ESTABLISH AN EFFECTIVE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY AND INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL PLAN

Establish an infectious disease preparedness and response plan. The plan should follow recommendations in [guidance notes](#) from the [Ministry of Health](#) and directives from [Public Health Ontario](#). The plan should consider and address levels of risk associated with the workplace and job tasks related to community labs and SCCs. This includes how the organization will operate during the pandemic including sanitization protocols, equipment and resources, how employees report illness, how to ensure physical distancing and how work will be scheduled.

To access the most recent Ministry of Health guidance notes please visit and scroll down to find your relevant sector information: :

http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/2019_guidance.aspx

A list of activities and links to relevant resources to provide community labs and SCCs support in this area are listed below:

- Establish a system for [active screening](#). All clients should be screened by telephone and advised to use the [self-assessment tool](#) before appointments are scheduled and upon entry to the lab/SCC. Where possible implement a system for virtual and/or telephone consultations.
- Postpone non-essential appointments and tests. If appointments or tests are required, encourage customers to schedule appointments instead of drop-in appointments.
- Post [signage](#) at points of entry to the lab/SCC. Similar messaging can also be communicated on voicemails and websites.
- Primary screening should ideally be behind a plexiglass barrier, or if not available, while a 2-meter distance is maintained, or if not possible, while using droplet/contact precautions (gown, gloves, mask/respirator, and eye protection)
- **Positive screening over the phone:** The client should call [Telehealth](#) or their primary care provider for a virtual assessment; and their healthcare practitioner who ordered the requisition to determine the urgency to complete the test during the next 14 days. If possible, the client should rebook for when they have been medically cleared (2 negative tests obtained at least 24 hours apart, or no longer symptomatic and/or outside the 14-day period).
- **Positive screening at the lab/SCC with NON-URGENT lab test requisitions:** The client should be advised to go directly home, self-isolate, and contact Telehealth or their primary care provider for a virtual assessment.
- **Positive screening with URGENT lab test requisitions:** The client should be separated from other patients and staff so they are at least 2 meters or 6 feet apart and given a surgical/procedural mask to wear. They should be placed in a separate room where available. Lab/SCC staff must wear [PPE](#) for Droplet/Contact precautions (gown, gloves, mask/respirator, and eye protection) when obtaining samples or performing the test. Patient-contact surfaces should be [disinfected](#) as soon as possible. After their lab work, clients should be advised to go directly home, self-isolate, and contact Telehealth or their primary care provider for a virtual assessment.



- Have a system for reporting probable and confirmed cases to the supervisor or Medical Director for guidance. If the staff member is a practitioner with a duty to report diseases of public health significance under the [Health Protection and Promotion Act](#), they must contact the local [Public Health](#) unit. Communication about who will take responsibility, ensuring proper documentation, and implementing any advice given by the public health unit is critical for containing the spread.
- Under no circumstances should aerosol generating tests (e.g. sputum, breath tests, and buccal swabs) be performed on clients who screen positive. If the test is urgent, clients should be referred to facilities that are properly equipped with [PPE](#), negative pressure rooms with adequate ventilation and air changes. Appropriate coordination with local public health authorities and medical services are required. Clients should not be arriving to these facilities unannounced.
- [Specimen collection](#) for COVID-19 testing should only be done by authorized community labs or as otherwise arranged by local public health.
- Conduct RACE (Recognition, Assessment, Control and Evaluation) analysis to determine any additional controls that may be applicable.
- Implement sick leave policies and [coverage](#) for workers who may be self-isolating or are un-well by accessing extra staff or volunteers.
- Request employees change clothing at work and bag clothes if there is onsite laundry available. If a workplace supplied uniform and worksite laundry are not an option, employees should set up a decontamination station at their home that can be used immediately on arrival at home.

ENVIRONMENTAL CLEANING AND DISINFECTION

While employers always have an obligation to maintain clean workplaces that obligation becomes particularly essential during a pandemic that involves an infectious agent. All employers should increase the sanitization of sites.

Employers should focus on:

- Easy access to soap and water (or other ways to properly sanitize hands)
- Encouraging stringent [hand hygiene](#). Frequently wash hands with soap and water (for a minimum of 20 seconds) or alcohol-based (at least 60% alcohol) hand sanitizer.
- Sanitizing commonly touched surfaces, areas or items (e.g. door handles, light switches, tables, work surfaces, equipment, waiting chairs)
- Frequent sanitization of washroom facilities and common areas.
- For more information refer to [PIDAC Best Practices for Environmental Cleaning for Prevention and Control of Infections in All Health Care Settings](#).

SHARE INFORMATION

It is important that all parties in a workplace understand their roles and responsibilities. Employers will need to ensure health and safety policies are updated and posted for all employees to see. Using industry resources, including this one and those produced by [Public Services Health and Safety Association](#) (PSHSA) will improve awareness in the workplace and provide guidance for employers.



POST YOUR POLICIES

All employers need to post and communicate COVID-19 policies to employees. These policies should cover how the organization will operate, including but not limited to:

- Sanitization of sites and equipment
- How employees report illnesses
- How to ensure physical distancing
- How work will be scheduled

PHYSICAL DISTANCING

As advised by the Chief Medical Officer, public health officials, and outlined throughout government communications, [physical distancing](#) is required to control the spread of COVID-19. Physical distancing generally means maintaining a distance of at least 2 metres (6 feet) or more between persons. By maintaining physical distancing you are less likely to be exposed to a respiratory virus.

In order to ensure physical distancing in the workplace, employers should consider:

- Where staff are assigned to work
- Postponing non-essential appointments or convert to virtual appointments
- Implementing a system for virtual and/or telephone consultations when and where possible
- Reducing walk-in traffic by encouraging clients to use virtual check-ins and appointment bookings
- Allocating spaces for isolation of patients who screen positive
- Staggering start times, breaks and lunches
- Having staff work from home whenever possible (i.e. administrative staff)
- Suspending all group activities and gatherings

EVALUATE

When reviewing your occupational health and safety prevention program, ask and evaluate:

- Were the proper hygiene facilities (handwashing equipment) made available?
- Were physical distancing measures implemented?
- Was the personal protective equipment (PPE) required to protect staff while doing their job available?
- Was training on the proper use of PPE provided?
- Did staff know what to do if they had symptoms? Did they follow the recommended protocols?
- Are you aware of emergency risks in your region and how to prepare for different situations?



ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

O. REG 67/93 – HEALTH CARE AND RESIDENTIAL FACILITIES

Employers must develop, in consultation with the joint health and safety committee (JHSC) or health and safety representative (HSR), written measures and procedures and training and education for the health and safety of workers. This includes but is not limited to measures needed to protect workers from the risk of COVID-19, such as:

- Safe work practices
- Safe working conditions
- Proper hygiene practices and the use of hygiene facilities
- Control of infections
- Immunization against infectious diseases
- Use of appropriate antiseptics, disinfectants and decontaminants
- Use, wearing and care of personal protective equipment and its limitations (such as gloves, gowns, facial protection and respirators)

Employers must also review the measures and procedures at least once a year or more frequently as prescribed. Additional duties and obligations under OHS regulations are available at: [Ontario Regulation 67/93 Health Care and Residential Facilities](#).

LABORATORY AND SPECIMEN COLLECTION CENTRE LICENSING ACT

Labs and SCCs are required to follow all existing health and safety requirement as outlined in the [Laboratory and Specimen Collection Centre Licensing Act](#) and its Regulations, and other policies and guidelines as issued by the [Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care](#).

MINISTRY OF LABOUR TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT (MLTSD) REQUIREMENTS

The MLTSD is focused on providing enhanced protections for workers. [Effective March 19, 2020, the Employment Standards Act, 2020, was amended to provide job-protected leave for employees affected by COVID-19](#). Click here for more information: <https://bit.ly/2Uiptql>.

TRACK AND MONITOR YOUR WORKFORCE

Due to the latency period of COVID-19, it is important to track where employees have worked. If an employee tests positive for COVID-19, the local public health unit will ask employers to provide information on where the employee worked as well as the contact information of any other employee who may have been exposed. Employers will track information and Public Health Units will respond.

The more detailed your information is, the better Public Health can respond and help.



LABS AND SCC SECTOR RESOURCES

COVID-19 GOVERNMENT UPDATES

Stay updated with daily government updates:

- <https://www.ontario.ca/page/2019-novel-coronavirus> (Ontario COVID-19 webpage)
- <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html> (Canada COVID-19 webpage)
- <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/> (Public Health Ontario)
- http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/2019_guidance.aspx (Ontario Ministry of Health Guidance for the Health Sector)

ONTARIO GOVERNMENT AND AGENCY ISSUED RESOURCES ABOUT COVID-19

ONTARIO GOVERNMENT

<https://covid-19.ontario.ca/>

This above link provides updates on the provincial government response to the pandemic. This includes:

- status of cases in Ontario;
- current affected areas;
- symptoms and treatments;
- how to protect yourself and self-isolate; and
- updated Ontario news on the virus.

PUBLIC HEALTH ONTARIO

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/diseases-and-conditions/infectious-diseases/respiratory-diseases/novel-coronavirus>

Public Health Ontario is providing up-to-date resources on COVID-19, including:

- links to evolving public health guidelines, position statements, and situational updates;
- a synopsis of key articles updating on the latest findings related to the virus;
- recommendations for use of personal protective equipment;
- testing information; and,
- other public resources.



OTHER COVID-19 RESOURCES

PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html>

This link outlines the actions being taken by the Government of Canada to limit spread of the virus, as well as what is happening in provinces and communities across the country. It also maintains a live update of the number of cases by province.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

WHO provides the latest guidance and information related to the global outbreak and spread beyond Canadian borders. It also provides the most up-to-date information on:

- current research and development around the virus
- a COVID-19 situation “dashboard”
- emergency preparedness measures; and,
- live media updates on the spread of the virus.

OTHER RESOURCES

There is a host of additional resources available to help address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Resources include:

- [Ontario Association of Medical Laboratories](#) guidelines for healthcare providers and resources for patients
- Public Health Ontario website for [Laboratory Services](#)
- The Government of Canada’s guide for [Preventing COVID-19 in the workplace](#): Employers, employees and essential service workers
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s [Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers](#)
- The Harvard Business Review’s [Employer Preparedness Questions](#)
- Public Health Unit websites:
<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx>

PUBLIC SERVICES HEALTH AND SAFETY ASSOCIATION RESOURCES

- Occupational Illness: Infectious Disease Reporting Form:
<https://www.pshsa.ca/resources/occupational-illness-infectious-disease-reporting-form>
- COVID-19 Resources: <https://www.pshsa.ca/covid-19>