

COVID-19 RESOURCES

BCFED HEALTH & SAFETY CENTRE

Workplaces in British Columbia have been affected by the COVID-19 public health emergency, and many are taking unprecedented precautions to arrest the spread of the virus. This has left many workers wondering how they can protect themselves and their workplaces during these challenging times. A worker's right to a safe workplace has not been suspended, and occupational health and safety are more important than ever. This bulletin outlines how our health and safety rights function during the outbreak and how workers can keep their workplaces safe.

HOW DO MY RIGHTS AT WORK APPLY DURING THE COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY?

Right to Know

Workers have the right to know about the health and safety hazards to which they may be exposed. In the context of COVID-19, employers must inform workers of any reasonably anticipated contact, mechanisms of transmission, work activities that may lead to exposure, and controls to eliminate or mitigate exposure. They must also provide training and education on the workplace's exposure control plan.

Right to Participate

Workers continue to have a right to participate, including in their workplace's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. This includes the participation of the joint health and safety committee, or the worker health and safety representative, in the development of the workplace's exposure control plan, in the investigation of symptoms related to occupational exposure, and in workplace evaluations for determining appropriate personal protective equipment.

Right to Refuse Unsafe Work

Workers must not go to work if they are experiencing COVID-19-like symptoms, if they have recently travelled internationally, or if a member of their household has been exposed to COVID-19. Workers must also continue to refuse conditions that pose an undue hazard to themselves or any other person.

It is important to note that the process for refusing unsafe work remains in effect, and workers must exhaust the process in its entirety (unless otherwise specified in your collective agreement):

1. *A worker must report the hazardous condition to their supervisor or employer, who must immediately investigate.*
2. *If the worker is not satisfied with the outcome of the investigation, a second investigation must occur, usually in the presence of a worker member of the joint health and safety committee (or worker health and safety representative).*
3. *If this does not resolve the matter, both the worker and employer must contact the Workers Compensation Board of BC (for federally regulated industries, contact Employment and Social Development Canada) who will conduct a third investigation and issue any orders deemed necessary.*

Every refusal of unsafe work is assessed on a case-by-case basis. A worker's age and health, the diagnosis of a coworker, the lack of training or measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission may all be relevant factors in determining the danger posed by the work.



Prohibition Against Discriminatory Action

Workers are protected against retaliatory actions by an employer for exercising any of the rights listed above, or for reporting an injury, disease or hazardous condition to the Workers Compensation Board.

WHAT IS AN EXPOSURE CONTROL PLAN?

An exposure control plan is required in every workplace where workers might face occupational exposure to a biological agent, such as COVID-19. It identifies all tasks in the workplace where occupational exposure is possible, determines the risk associated with each task, and the steps required to prevent or minimize exposure. These can include engineering controls, administrative measures, or personal protective equipment. Workers must receive adequate education and training on the contents of the plan, and records must be kept. If you are unsure about your workplace's exposure control plan, ask a member of your joint health and safety committee (or worker health and safety representative).

HOW ARE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH COVID-19 ASSESSED?

An exposure control plan must include a risk assessment performed by a qualified person. Workplace factors to consider include the nature of the work that takes place, the number of workers present, specific tasks and how often they are performed, and the physical layout of the workplace. Specific consideration for COVID-19 should be made regarding workers who are more vulnerable, such as older workers or those with underlying medical conditions. The assessment should include the most current information available from the BC Centre for Disease Control and the provincial Ministry of Health.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF PRACTICAL MEASURES TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19?

Some control measures may include, but are not limited to:

- Increased capacity for remote work (work from home).
- Limit contact with other workers or the public. Maintain distances of 2 metres where possible.
- Where level of risk between worker groups is different, isolate the workers from each other including different access points to the workplace and different break and washroom areas.
- Prevent exposure through engineered controls such as plexiglass barriers.
- Increase cleaning and sanitizing of hard surfaces with sanitizing agents confirmed to be effective against this virus.
- Increase the number of hand wash and/or hand sanitizer stations.
- Enforce social distancing such as restricting access to numbers of persons in an area.
- Ensure all workers receive training on transmission routes and control measures implemented.

WHERE DO I FIND CREDIBLE INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19?

The BC Centre for Disease Control, a program of the Provincial Health Services Authority, provides provincial and national leadership in disease surveillance, detection, treatment, prevention and consultation. This is the best place to find timely, science-based information about COVID-19, including prevention guidelines and a self-assessment tool: <http://covid-19.bccdc.ca> In addition, the BCFED will provide updates for workers here: <https://bcfed.ca/covid19>

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

BCFED Health & Safety Centre: 1-888-223-5669

WorkSafeBC: 1-888-621-SAFE

ESDC Labour Program: 1-800-641-4049

If you are a member of a union in BC, contact your union local.