

Guidelines for Clients Re: Coronavirus (COVID-19)

The World Health Organization states that “people of all ages can be infected by the new coronavirus (2019-nCoV). Older people, and people with pre-existing medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease) appear to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus. WHO advises people of all ages to take steps to protect themselves from the virus, for example by following good hand hygiene and good respiratory hygiene.”¹ COVID-19 spreads in a similar manner to the flu.

Public Health Canada indicates that “those who are infected with COVID-19 may have little to no symptoms. You may not know you have symptoms of COVID-19 because they are similar to a cold or flu. Symptoms may take up to 14 days to appear after exposure to COVID-19. This is the longest known infectious period for this disease. Symptoms have included:

- fever
- cough
- difficulty breathing
- pneumonia in both lungs

In severe cases, infection can lead to death.”²

Key items for clients to assess and prepare in the face of the spread of COVID-19, particularly if Canada experiences wide-spread community transmission of the virus are as follows:

1) Limiting exposure in the workplace

- Review and revise as appropriate health and safety protocols and policies, such as housekeeping and cleaning routines, personal hygiene protocols, etc.
- Consider establishing a communicable illness policy and/or communicating to employees your current policies on health and safety and how they apply to COVID-19
- Encourage employees to stay home when they are sick and review any and all sick leave and health benefits available to them
- Put in place a reporting protocol (typically part of business continuity plans) for employees to report in if they suspect exposure to COVID-19 and to self-isolate, or if they have contracted the virus.
- Assess the risks in your workplace and determine if/when it makes sense to establish work from home routines if that is possible in your industry and business.

2) Review and update all applicable policies and train employees on them, such as:

- Sick leave policy; outline all benefits available to employees, including EI sick leave benefits
- Accommodation and return to work policies; it may be difficult to obtain doctors notes for every employee to ensure clean bill of health prior to returning to work, so do not make these mandatory. Instead, follow the CDC guidelines of ensuring employees are free of fever (100.4° F [37.8° C] or greater using an oral thermometer), signs of a fever, and any other symptoms for at least 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing or other symptom-altering medicines (e.g. cough suppressants) before returning to work.
- Leaves to care for sick family members
- Work from home policy

¹ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/symptoms.html>

- Alternate work arrangement policy (such as flexible hours, staggered shifts, etc.)
- Attendance policy
- Travel policy
- Harassment/Discrimination policy – especially relevant if you start to see discriminatory behaviour as a result of COVID-19
- What to do in event employee shows up to work ill with COVID-19 symptoms

3) Plan for potential impacts to business and create and/or revise an existing Business Continuity Plan:

- Plan for how your business will continue to operate with potential interruptions to its workforce, supply chain, customers, travel restrictions, etc.
- Absenteeism due to illness or caring for sick relatives
- Absenteeism due to quarantine and self-isolation
- Decrease in workload due to supply/demand issues

4) Protect Privacy of Impacted Employees

- Ensure that if employees are off sick due to COVID-19 or are home caring for relatives with the virus, that their privacy is respected unless they give express permission to share the reason for their absence with others.

5) Stay Informed with Reputable Sources of Information

[World Health Organization](#)

[Public Health Agency of Canada](#)

[Public Health Ontario](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)

Other Local Public Health Resources

Stay away from social media news that is not sourced from a reputable agency.

6) Develop a Question and Answer fact sheet for employees and post in an accessible area (intranet, bulletin board, etc.)

- Easily accessible information for employees so they can obtain immediate answers to their questions re: pertinent policies, programs, changes to business as a result of COVID-19.
- Keep the doors of communication open and revise the Q&As as new information or details are obtained

7) If business is impacted, know your options with regards to:

- a. [Employment Insurance's Work-Sharing program](#)
- b. **Temporary layoffs:** ensure you have clause in your offer letters allowing you to do this
- c. **Permanent layoffs:** work with your HR professional to determine appropriate severance packages and assist in drafting letters.