

Managing a Workplace Outbreak: Special Considerations During Extraordinary Times

The COVID-19 pandemic is creating unique challenges for businesses and individuals around the world, and delivering news to your employees about a workplace infection or outbreak can be daunting. WSPS has created this resource to help address the issues of communicating outbreak exposure with sensitivity and confidentiality issues front of mind.

The key is to communicate accurately and swiftly, while reducing anxiety for your employees. In this resource you will find helpful guidance to assist you, mental health resources that can be a valuable lifeline for your employees, along with best practices and legal obligation information.

Guidance & Resources

Q. I have a positive case or outbreak in the workplace – what do I need to know and do?

An employee who tests positive for COVID-19 will be required to self-isolate and will not be able to work, unless healthy and able to do so from their home.	Self Isolation Guidance
Employers must report any occupationally acquired illnesses (i.e. worker exposed to COVID-19 while at work) to the Workplace Safety Insurance Board (WSIB) within three (3) days of receiving notification of the illness.	WSIB Reporting FAQs about Claims and COVID-19
In addition, if an employer is advised that the worker got sick due to an exposure at the workplace or that a claim has been filed with the WSIB, the employer must notify the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development in writing within four (4) days.	Safety Plan Question 4 How to Notify MLTSD
Contact tracing related to positive COVID-19 diagnosis is handled by public health; however, the employer should have a support system in place to enable effective contact tracing within the workplace. It is also a requirement for the employer to take every reasonable precaution in the circumstance to protect the health and safety of workers, and do a risk assessment to determine what parts of the jobsite and what other workers (or customers) the affected worker would have had contact with.	COVID-19 (coronavirus) and Workplace Health and Safety Local Public Health Unit
If a worker tests positive for COVID-19, validate that established routine cleaning has included thorough disinfection of surfaces that may have been touched by the worker. If any gaps are identified, conduct any additional cleaning and disinfection as soon as possible. Refer to the guidance on cleaning and disinfection of public settings, including schools, transit, colleges/universities and other workplaces in Ontario.	Public Health Ontario's Cleaning and Disinfection for Public Settings Employment Standards and Covid 19

Q. How do I effectively communicate with employees regarding an outbreak or positive case in the workplace?

When communicating, avoid the temptation to allay fears by saying, "There's nothing to worry about; everything will be fine." This is the worst thing someone can hear when they are worried, and in the case of our current crisis, it simply isn't accurate.	Workplace Worries During COVID 19
Maintain confidentiality and discretion when communicating the news to staff about the positive case(s).	

Remind staff about the measures/controls in place to avoid further exposure such as infection control policies, decontamination procedures, isolation protocols etc. This will reassure staff of the safety measures in place.	Consider referring staff to your workplace safety plan for additional details and a reminder that it is updated frequently to make improvements
Remind your employees about availability to any Employee Assistance Programs, workplace coaches, HR staff or other programs and options, in case they have additional questions or concerns.	Communicate internal links, contact information etc
Q. How can I reduce anxiety and foster positive mental health in the workplace?	
Employees might feel helpless after hearing this news and can become paralyzed by fear. However, leaders who are attuned to the perceptions and emotions of their employees can help. Consider using this resource for some additional guidance.	<i>Leaders Instilling Hope and Resiliency During COVID 19</i>
Talk openly about things that might be causing fear or feeding uncertainty. Answer questions when you can, and be honest when you can't. Remind employees about what you are doing on their behalf and what they can do for each other.	Consider holding a "town hall" meeting to allow for open communication. Workers may also be interested in the following link. <i>Assess Your Risk of Getting Covid19</i>
Instead of guessing and thinking you understand what employees are worried about, ask them directly. If you believe they may feel uncomfortable providing feedback, you can capture concerns in an anonymous manner such as having them complete a survey.	<i>Managing Mental Health During COVID 19 Signs and symptoms</i>
Q. How can I evaluate and maintain my pandemic programs and safety plan?	
Evaluate your pandemic policies and or processes to understand if the current controls are effective or need improvement or updating. This can be done by investigating recent incidents or near misses, as well as monitoring official government (e.g. provincial and/or federal) websites for any changes or updates to incorporate into policies or processes. Checking with legal counsel, as applicable, is another consideration.	<i>Safety Plan Guidance</i> <i>How Ontario is responding to COVID-19 Ontario.ca</i> <i>Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Outbreak update - Canada.ca</i>
Encourage staff to report any near misses, incidents, or potential exposure to COVID-19. Treat any reported issues or loss reports as an opportunity for improvement rather than a problem. Encourage staff to also contact their H&S representative or JHSC representative as applicable to discuss concerns and provide additional feedback regarding measures and controls.	<i>Effective Investigations</i>

For more information visit www.wsps.ca/COVID19

NOTE: This document is intended for informational purposes only to provide an overview of the potential hazards posed in the workplace due to COVID-19, and reflects the most current information as of the publication date. It is not intended as medical or scientific advice, to provide a comprehensive risk assessment for all workplaces, or to replace any legislated workplace safety obligations. WSPS has not endorsed and does not endorse any particular product or company as a solution to the risk presented by COVID-19. Due to the ongoing evolution of the situation in Ontario and around the world, this document may be used as a guide for Employers in addition to guidance delivered by public health authorities such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Ontario Ministry of Health, Public Health Ontario and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Any use which is made of this document by any Employer or individual, or any reliance on or decisions to be made based on it, are the responsibility of the Employer or individual. WSPS and its partners, officers, directors, employees, agents, representatives, suppliers and service providers accept no responsibility for any errors or omissions in content or for damages of any kind or nature suffered by any Employer or any third party as a result of use of or reliance on this communication.

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