Events and Gatherings During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

This tip sheet is for employers, organizers and managers of events and gatherings, such as concerts, sports, funerals, weddings, festivals, conferences, fairs, parties, and religious ceremonies, rites, and services. It provides an overview of potential workplace risks and hazards due to COVID-19 and recommends control measures. This document can also be informative to workers and attendees.

In all cases, guidance from local public health authorities and your jurisdictional occupational health and safety regulator must be followed.

For general COVID-19 prevention practices, refer to these CCOHS documents:
COVID-19 Health and Safety Resources
Protect Yourself and Others from COVID-19
COVID-19 Health and Safety Planning for Employers
COVID-19 Prevention for Workers
COVID-19 FAQ

For industry specific guidance refer to these tip sheets:

- Cinemas
- Live Performances: Singing, Music, and Theatre
- Sports
- Places of Worship
- Funeral Homes, Mortuaries and Related Services

Consider the Risks

The risk of COVID-19 transmission is increased with:

- Longer and more frequent person-to-person interactions, especially when less than 2 metres apart.
- Crowded places and large gatherings.
- Generation of respiratory droplets and aerosols (e.g., when speaking, coughing, singing etc.).
- Poor ventilation.
- Inadequate hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette or access to cleaning facilities and products.
- Contaminated high-touch surfaces and shared objects.
- High number of COVID-19 cases in the local community (or an outbreak).
- Low levels of COVID-19 vaccination in attendees.
- COVID-19 variants which are more transmissible.

Workers and attendees may be exposed to a combination of these risks. Consider all possible COVID-19 exposure scenarios in your setting and perform a COVID-19 risk assessment. Develop or use an existing risk assessment checklist to document and evaluate all work setting characteristics, activities, job roles, and the impacts of attendees (including vulnerable populations such as those exempt from vaccination). Consider conducting a new risk assessment for each event to account for different risks present and constantly changing COVID-19 data.

Here are sample questions to help you identify the COVID-19 risks:

- Are there many COVID-19 cases in the local community?
- What percentage of people are vaccinated?
- Is the event indoors or outdoors? Is the ventilation adequate (outdoors typically have better ventilation)?
- Is enough space provided for each person in attendance, in accordance with the applicable fire code and physical distancing (if required)?
- Are you planning to have multiple areas where people will gather? Does each area present different COVID-19 transmission risks? For example, the risks of an indoor washroom may be different from an outdoor stadium setting.
- What activities will workers do? For example, greeting and screening attendees, customer service, serving food, cleaning, and disinfecting, etc.
- Are interactions between people expected, and if so, how frequent and physically close will they be?
- Who will attend the event? Is it only for people who have regular contact (such as family or co-workers), or unrelated groups?
- What is the anticipated turnout of older or vulnerable populations, or people who may not follow control measures such as children or people with disabilities?
- How many people will attend the event?

- Is the event scheduled for a limited number of pre-registered attendees or can anyone drop in?
- Will there be frequent contact with high-touch surfaces or objects (e.g., washrooms, door handles, service counters, equipment, instruments etc.)?
- Will there be singing, shouting, or heavy breathing?
- Will there be loud music that may require shouting?
- Will food and beverages be served and, if so, how (buffet, pre-packaged etc.)?
- How long will the event last?

Control Measures

To provide the highest level of protection to workers and attendees, use multiple public health measures and workplace controls in a layered approach, since no single measure is completely effective. Be careful not to create new workplace hazards or negatively impact existing safety controls. Review and adjust programs as necessary, in consultation with the workplace health and safety committee or representative.

A written workplace COVID-19 safety plan, supported by a risk assessment, documents the control measures you have or will put in place to protect workers and attendees from COVID-19 transmission risks. A written plan may be legally required by the jurisdiction in which you operate. Refer to local authorities for details on what must be included in the plan, if it needs to be posted etc.

Meet your legal occupational health and safety obligations by doing everything reasonably possible in the circumstances to protect the health and safety of your workers. Implement policies and programs to accommodate workers who are at high risk of severe disease or outcomes (i.e., immunocompromised, have chronic medical conditions, unable to be vaccinated) from a COVID-19 infection.

The best way to reduce exposure is to hold the event virtually. However, when this isn't possible, refer to the sections below which provide tips on how to apply COVID-19 control measures.

Ventilation

- Ventilate indoor spaces appropriately; generally, the more enclosed the space, the more ventilation will be necessary. Seek advice from a heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) specialist on ways to increase air exchanges per hour and reduce or eliminate recirculated air, information on available upgrades to air filtration and disinfection, and on maintenance and cleaning of HVAC systems.

- Open windows and doors, if possible.

- Exhaust fans in washrooms and kitchens should vent to the outside and be run at low speed to remove contaminated air while not creating significant pressure changes.

- Make sure that air circulation or cooling fans do not direct air flow from person to person.

- If ventilation cannot be improved, consider portable air filtration units with high-efficiency particulate (HEPA) filters.

- Keep humidity between 30% and 50% for indoor events. Lower humidity may cause the virus to stay suspended in the air longer.

Physical Barriers

Install barriers, such as clear acrylic plastic or plexiglass, to separate workers from attendees where possible and appropriate, making sure not to block aisles or exits (i.e., emergency escape). Locations for barriers could include reception and box office areas as well as between urinals in the washroom.

Barriers should be positioned to block respiratory droplets. Clean and disinfect barriers at least daily.

Physical Distancing

Physical distancing requires people to:

- Maintain a safe distance from others (at least 2 metres in all directions).

- Avoid non-essential in-person interactions.

- Keep interactions as few and as brief as possible.

For general physical distancing recommendations, refer to CCOHS' COVID-19 and Physical Distancing.

Consider the following tips for additional safety:

- Encourage reservations, preferably online or by phone.

- Modify queuing (line-ups) and waiting areas. Install stanchions or floor markings, at least 2 metres apart in all directions, to keep people apart and indicate where to stand.

- Arrange seating or standing areas to maintain at least 2 metres distance between each person or each unrelated group (cohort). For fixed seating, block access to seats to create the required spacing.

- Follow occupancy limits set by the local public health or government authority and the applicable fire code. Keep in mind how limits apply to smaller areas such as washrooms and elevators. Occupancy limits include workers and attendees combined.

- Limit access to sinks, seating, urinals, etc. which are within 2 metres of each other.

- To avoid crowding and queues, consider staggered times for workers and attendees to arrive and leave the event.

- Consider how people will use or travel through shared spaces, such as hallways and staircases. Establish one-way routes where appropriate, using floor markings, signage, and other visual cues.

- Redesign tasks to minimize close physical contact or modify them so they can be performed by one person (if safe to do so).

- Ask attendees to leave promptly when the event is over.

- Plan for any impacts of weather, especially if it may force an outdoor event into an underprepared indoor space.

- Allow exceptions to distancing guidance in certain circumstances such as rescuing a distressed person, providing first aid, or performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Hygiene Measures

- Encourage good and frequent hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.

- Provide hand washing stations or hand sanitizer dispensers (always with minimum 60% alcohol content) in high traffic areas such as entrances, exits, service counters, breakrooms, elevators, front desk, kitchens, vehicle loading areas, washrooms (including portable toilets) and throughout the venue.

- Everyone must sanitize or wash their hands before entry.

- Provide staff with hand sanitizer.

- Periodically check and restock sanitizer.

- Replace soft surfaces with hard surfaces which are more easily disinfected (i.e., change carpet to tile, cushioned benches to wooden or plastic benches).

- Reduce the number of shared objects. Avoid sharing equipment (such as clipboards, pens etc.) if possible.

- Reduce the number of high-touch points:

  - Motion activated automatic doors.

  - Hand motion activated automatic faucets.

  - Automatic flushing toilets and urinals.

  - Hand or foot activated soap, towel, and sanitizer dispensers.

  - Hand or foot activated plastic lined waste containers.

  - No touch methods of tracking worker attendance such as key cards or electronic messaging.

  - Contactless payment methods.

  - Replace hard copy agendas, menus, forms, waivers, tickets etc. with electronic ones that are easily accessible by smart phones (e.g., QR code or website).

- Have everyone store their personal items (such as jackets) in separate lockers, in labeled, sealed bins/bags, or spaces which do not allow physical contact between each person's belongings.

- Encourage digital payments and minimize cash payments as much as possible. Use disposable gloves when handling cash and periodically wash hands with soap and water or sanitize.

- Clean payment pin pads, touch screens and any other shared devices or equipment between users.

- Do not offer self-serve options for food.
- Have cutlery, condiments, napkins, and other items behind a counter and available upon request instead of using dispensers.
- Cooking and serving staff should wear masks and follow good food safety requirements (never cough or sneeze over food).
- Require that workers wear freshly cleaned uniforms or clothes for each shift.
- Discourage singing, yelling, and chanting. Keep noise and music levels low to allow people to communicate without shouting.

Food and Drinks Safety

Preparing, serving, and consuming food and drinks pose risks of COVID-19 transmission. Follow the guidance for restaurants, bars, and food services.

Communication and Training

For general recommendations, refer to CCOHS' COVID-19 Communication and Training.

Communicate the policies and procedures of the workplace or venue (including public health measures) to all workers and attendees. Use posters or infographics where they can be easily noticed. Keep language barriers in mind. Communications should be in languages that workers understand.

COVID-19 specific training should include the following:

- Common COVID-19 symptoms and how to respond when symptoms are identified.
- What to do if sick, and how to get tested for COVID-19.
- How and when to report COVID-19 illness.
- Benefits and options for vaccination.
- How to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect themselves at work.
- Ways to stay informed using reputable sources.
- Policies, plans, and procedures (such as mask policy, vaccination policy, cleaning and disinfection schedule, COVID-19 safety plan). Recommunicate whenever changes are made.
- Ways to diffuse difficult situations with workers or attendees. For example, train workers on conflict resolution techniques to deal with people who may react aggressively to COVID-19 public health measure or limited services.
- Train workers on the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS). Make sure workers understand how to protect themselves from products they use (including cleaning products).

Post signs and infographics where they can be seen by workers and attendees, such as:

- Take the Time to Wash Your Hands: kitchens, washrooms.
- Prevent the Spread of Infections: entrances, high-touch surfaces.
- How to Safely Use a Non-Medical Mask or Face Covering: entrances.
- About coronavirus disease (COVID-19): entrances.
- Screening poster (obtained from your local public health authority): entrances.
- Signs indicating the maximum occupancy for rooms or spaces, especially those which should have few occupants such as washrooms or elevators.
- Floor markers or posters which encourage physical distancing.
- No entry or access to restricted areas or facilities.

Vaccination

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- Follow applicable government requirements which identify vaccination of workers as a condition of employment, or proof of vaccination as a requirement for the public to enter the establishment or venue.

- The employer, health and safety committee or representative, and union should discuss any concerns surrounding mandatory COVID-19 vaccination requirements, including any valid exemptions and need for accommodation.

- Develop a COVID-19 vaccination policy.

- Encourage eligible workers to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Acknowledge that some individuals may not be eligible to receive the vaccine (proof of exemption may be required).

- Provide support for workers to attend local vaccination clinic appointments if these times occur during work hours.

- All workplace COVID-19 procedures and public health measures must still be followed even if all workers are fully vaccinated.

- Share additional information on the vaccine by posting it on the safety board or sharing it electronically. Refer to the Government of Canada's Vaccines for COVID-19, The facts about COVID-19 vaccines, and CCOHS' COVID-19 Vaccines for detailed information about vaccination.

Screening and Contact Tracing

- Request proof of vaccination as required.

- Evaluate the need for passive screening (where individuals self-monitor and report possible illness or exposure to COVID-19) and active screening. Implement as necessary.

- Administer health screening questions to all workers and attendees before they are allowed into the venue. Include current COVID-19 symptoms (if any), recent travel and potential COVID-19 exposures.

- Create your own list of questions, use a generic checklist form, or use one provided by your local public health authority.

- Consider having workers complete a self-assessed screening using a company web link or app before coming into work.

- Rapid testing may be performed in addition to the screening questionnaire and, in jurisdictions where permitted, in place of COVID-19 vaccination verification for vaccine-exempt persons. Ensure that all safety protocols for rapid testing (personal protective equipment, training, etc.) are in place.

- Collect the contact information (name, phone number, email address) of all persons entering the venue, the date, and time. This information should be provided to the local public health authority if requested for the purpose of contact tracing. All information must be safely stored and destroyed as required by privacy legislation.

- Workers or members that pass the screening can enter the facility.

COVID-19 Response Plan

- Refer to the infographic Responding to COVID-19 in the Workplace for what to do if a worker or other person is identified as having symptoms or has potentially been exposed to COVID-19.

- Anyone who does not pass the screening should not be allowed into the facility.

- Workers who do not pass the screening should contact their supervisor. The supervisor should instruct them to stay (or return) home and monitor themselves for symptoms. Workers should contact their health care provider or local public health authority if they develop symptoms or symptoms worsen.

- When any person experiences COVID-19 symptoms while already in the facility:

  - Immediately have them wear a medical (surgical) mask. If not available, they should properly wear a well-constructed and well-fitting non-medical mask.

  - Ask them to leave as soon as it is safe for them to do so. If needed, isolate them in a designated area, away from other workers and members, until they can leave.

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- Call **911** for medical assistance if symptoms are life threatening. Notify their emergency contact.

- If the case is work-related involving a worker, additional notifications may be required. Contact your jurisdictional occupational health and safety regulator and workers' compensation board for guidance. Complete an incident report and begin an investigation.

- Adopt sick leave policies that are flexible and consider providing support to workers who are off sick (i.e., do not penalise workers that do not come to work when they feel sick).

Cleaning and Disinfection

Develop a cleaning and disinfecting schedule and follow a standard operating procedure for touch points. The schedule should identify when cleaning needs to be done and record when it has taken place.

Use an approved hard surface disinfectant, follow the manufacturer's instructions or safety data sheet, and focus cleaning and disinfection on:

- Areas where attendees and workers are expected to spend most of their time.

- High transmission risk objects and surfaces such as doors and handrails. They should be disinfected multiple times a day.

- Washrooms, including faucets and flushing mechanisms which require touch to operate.

- Tables, chairs, and eating surfaces (before and after each use).

- Barriers.

After cleaning and disinfecting, consider:

- Properly handle used cleaning cloths, towels etc. to prevent contamination, and launder or dispose of them after every use.

- Deposit heavily contaminated or disposable items into plastic lined waste containers.

- Dispose of garbage at least daily and follow up with hand hygiene.

Mask Wearing

Refer to the Government of Canada's Non-medical masks and CCOHS' Get the Facts on Masks for detailed information on how to properly wear and care for masks.

- Follow the mask wearing requirements of your local public health authority and jurisdiction. If not required, mask wearing should still be encouraged as an additional measure when there is higher risk for COVID-19 spread (e.g., low vaccination coverage, increased community spread, variants of concern), or when physical distancing is not possible.

- Masks should be well constructed and well fitting, covering the nose, mouth, and chin without gaps.

- Encourage people not to touch their face or mask with unwashed hands.

- For some individuals, not being able to see a workers' face and mouth clearly may cause difficulties (e.g., hard of hearing, using lip reading, needing to see facial expressions). Consider using a clear mask.

- Workers may also wish to use eye protection (such as safety glasses, goggles, or face shield) in addition to a mask, when in close physical contact with others. Note that face shields do not offer equivalent protection to masks.

- Implement or update your workplace heat stress program, as mask wearing may increase physiological stress during high exertion tasks.

- Masks should not be worn by anyone who is unable to remove the mask without assistance (e.g., due to their age, ability, or developmental status).

- Children under the age of 2 should not wear masks. Between the ages of 2 and 5, children may wear masks if supervised. Children over 5 should wear a mask.

- Be aware that non-medical masks have limitations, and improper mask use and disposal can increase the risk of infection.

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- While non-medical masks are useful in reducing the spread of COVID-19, they are not considered personal protective equipment as they do not meet regulated testing and certification standards.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Refer to the Government of Canada's Personal protective equipment (COVID-19): Overview and CCOHS' Designing an Effective PPE Program for more detailed information about PPE.

- PPE includes such items as surgical masks, respirators, eye protection (e.g., goggles, face shield), gowns, gloves, and safety footwear.
- Continue to use PPE for existing occupational safety hazards and emergencies. COVID-19 PPE policies must not interfere when a higher level of protection is needed for the task.
- Employers should conduct a hazard assessment and make sure that workers have the correct PPE for the tasks and activities they are performing.
- Workers may need PPE if they are:
  - Performing tasks that require them to be less than 2 metres from another person without a physical barrier (e.g., serving event attendees),
  - Using cleaning and disinfecting products (refer to the manufacturers' safe handling instructions),
  - Providing emergency first aid.
- Workers must be trained on how to properly use and care for their PPE.

COVID Alert App

- Encourage workers to install the COVID Alert App on their phone. This app is designed to let people in Canada know whether they may have been exposed to COVID-19.
- The app maintains your privacy; it does not record or share your geographic location.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, please contact your local hospital, call 911 immediately, or contact a Crisis Centre in your area.

It is important that mental health resources and support are provided to all workers, including access to an employee assistance program, if available.

For further information on COVID-19, refer to the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Note that this guidance is just some of the adjustments organizations can make during a pandemic. Adapt this list by adding your own good practices and policies to meet your organization's specific needs.

Disclaimer: As public and occupational health and safety information is changing rapidly, local public health authorities should be consulted for specific, regional guidance. This information is not intended to replace medical advice or legislated health and safety obligations. Although every effort is made to ensure the accuracy, currency and completeness of the information, CCOHS does not guarantee, warrant, represent or undertake that the information provided is correct, accurate or current. CCOHS is not liable for any loss, claim, or demand arising directly or indirectly from any use or reliance upon the information.