Introduction

This tip sheet is for employers and workers who are returning to the workplace, after an easing of COVID-19 restrictions. For some, this will be their first time returning to the workplace since the start of the pandemic.

Employers should maintain (or implement) their COVID-19 workplace controls, no matter how many of their workers are vaccinated, until public health restrictions in your area are reduced. In all cases, guidance from local public health authorities and your jurisdictional health and safety regulator must be followed.

For general COVID-19 prevention practices, refer to the CCOHS COVID-19 Resources, including Protect Yourself and Others.

Consider the Risks

- Each workplace is unique. Employers need to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances to protect the health and safety of their staff. These precautions include assessing the risks of COVID-19, and other health and safety hazards in the workplace.

- The employer must then implement appropriate hazard controls using the hierarchy of controls (i.e., elimination, substitution, engineering controls, administrative policies, and the use of personal protective equipment). Follow the advice and restrictions of your local public health authority and health and safety regulator. Use recommended public health measures and apply them in a layered approach.

- Create a written safety plan that outlines the precautions that will be taken to safety re-open the workplace. Involve your health and safety committee or representative in the development of this plan.

- Regularly review the adequacy of the safety plan and make improvements as necessary. Determine if there are any new hazards created by any of the changes implemented at the workplace. For example, if new cleaning chemicals are used, are workers properly trained?

Maintain/Implement Workplace Controls (Short-Term)

Until public health restrictions are reduced in your area, it is important for employers to maintain (or implement) measures to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. Consideration also needs to be given to re-instating measures where applicable (e.g., an outbreak in the community, which may lead to a surge in cases). Examples of measures are listed below.

- Vaccines

  - Encourage workers to get vaccinated for COVID-19.

  - Employers need to maintain their COVID-19 workplace controls regardless of how many of their workers are vaccinated.

- Capacity Limits

    - Once permitted to re-open, some workplaces (e.g., retail, restaurants, gyms, personal services) may be required to operate with reduced capacity.

    - Follow local public heath requirements regarding capacity limits.

- Screening

    - [Actively screen](#) anyone who enters the facility. Use a [checklist](#), a web-based tool, or have a designated person ask direct questions.

    - To support contact tracing efforts, record the names and contact information of all staff and visitors who enter the workplace. Protect privacy and destroy contact information in a timely manner according to [privacy laws](#).

    - If readily available and feasible, consider implementing routine [rapid testing](#) of all consenting workers as an additional active screening measure. Consider how you will [manage the response](#) to a rapid test result.

- Reducing Interactions

    - Keep in-person interactions as few and as brief as possible.

    - Discourage unnecessary physical contact such as handshakes.

    - Discourage social activities (e.g., pot-luck lunches) and large company-wide meetings.

- Physical Distancing

    - Keep the greatest physical distance possible (at least 2 metres) from others, as much as possible.

    - Determine if any physical changes are required to the layout of the building to facilitate physical distancing (e.g., spacing between workstations).

    - Post capacity limits at entrances to shared areas (e.g., kitchens, washrooms, conference rooms, elevators).

- Physical Barriers

    - Install [physical barriers](#) in areas where it is not possible to maintain physical distancing (e.g., reception desks).

- Personal Hygiene

    - Encourage frequent and proper hand washing with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water aren't available, use a hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol.

    - Place hand sanitizer at building entrances and in high traffic areas (e.g., hallways).

- Cleaning and Disinfecting

    - All surfaces that may have had contact with another person (e.g., doorknobs, handrails, bathroom fixtures, countertops, equipment, workstations) should be routinely cleaned and disinfected.

    - For additional information, please refer to the CCOHS resource [Cleaning and Disinfecting](#).

- Wearing Masks

    - Follow local public health requirements for [wearing well-constructed and well-fitting masks](#).

- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

    - Assess the hazards in the workplace and determine what PPE is required for your workers (e.g., PPE when using cleaning and disinfecting chemicals).

    - Make sure that PPE is available, if required, and that workers are trained on the proper use of PPE. Develop a [PPE Program](#).

- Travel

    - Reduce non-essential work-related travel.

    - Follow government advice regarding travelling outside your province or territory and outside Canada. Refer to the Government of Canada website [Travel, Testing, Quarantine and Borders](#).

Preparing Building for Occupancy

- Evaluate the building and its mechanical and life safety systems to make sure the building is ready for occupancy.

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Returning to the Workplace After Easing of COVID-19 Restrictions

- Make sure that building and fire code legislative requirements are up to date (e.g., inspection, testing, maintenance of fire alarms, fire extinguishers, sprinkler systems, emergency lighting, emergency generators, exit signs, elevators, etc.).

- Make sure there is proper indoor ventilation. For example:

  - Verify that the mechanical ventilation system(s) for the building is operating properly.

  - Make sure that regular inspections and preventative maintenance for the ventilation system(s) are conducted according to manufacturer's instructions.

  - Consult a ventilation specialist to determine whether any improvements can be made to the ventilation system(s) to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., increasing the percentage of fresh air intake, increasing air exchange rates, and improving filtration).

  - Open windows if outdoor weather is suitable.

  - If stand-alone air-conditioning units or portable fans are used in the facility, aim the air stream so that it is not blowing directly from person to another.

  - For additional information on indoor ventilation, please refer to Guidance on Indoor Ventilation During the Pandemic (Government of Canada) and Indoor Ventilation: Guidance During The COVID-19 Pandemic (CCOHS).

- Check for hazards associated with prolonged facility shutdown such as:

  - Mould growth. Mould can grow anywhere there is water damage or dampness. The presence of mould does not always mean that health problems will occur. However, for some people the inhalation of mould or mould spores can lead to health problems or make certain health conditions worse. Any visible mould should be removed safely. Determine the source of moisture and fix the underlying problem.

  - Issues with stagnate water systems. Stagnant or standing water in a plumbing system can provide an opportunity for harmful bacteria such as *Legionella* to survive and grow. Stagnant water can also lead to low or undetectable levels of disinfectant, such as chlorine (which would normally prevent the growth of *Legionella*). Make sure that your water system is safe to use after a prolonged shutdown to minimize the risk of Legionnaires' disease and other diseases associated with stagnate water.

  - Metals in Drinking Water. When water sits for a long period in a pipe or fixture made from metals (e.g., lead or copper), the water can absorb the metals that that have leached from the pipe. Maximum acceptable concentrations for metals have been set in the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines. It is important to maintain safe drinking water quality within the building.~

  - Presence of rodents/pests. Take steps to prevent rodents/pests from entering the building. Have trained workers clean-up any droppings created by pests using appropriate procedures and PPE. Hantavirus is a virus that is found in the urine, saliva, or droppings of infected deer mice and some other rodents. Make sure that workers are protected from exposure to Hantavirus.

- Determine if any physical changes are required to the layout of the building to facilitate physical distancing (e.g., spacing between workstations).

- Make sure that any tools and safety equipment are operating properly (e.g., automated external defibrillators, emergency showers and eye wash stations).

- Verify that inspections required by health and safety legislation (e.g., lifting devices, first aid kits) are up to date.

- Determine if any staffing changes (e.g., retirements, new workers) affect any health and safety requirements (e.g., minimum number of first aiders, composition of health and safety committees).

- Update building evacuation plans and communicate to all workers.

- Make sure that updated health and safety information is posted in the workplace (e.g., list of first aiders).

- Make sure that aisles and exits are unobstructed, and the workplace is clean and ready for occupancy.

Remote Work

- Determine which roles should return to the workplace and which roles (if any) can continue to work remotely.

- Create a remote work policy and consider requests from workers who would like to continue working remotely.

- Consider offering workers a hybrid working model which blends working from home with working at the workplace.

- Retain technology infrastructure (if possible) that facilitates working from home where appropriate (e.g., individual laptops for workers, virtual private network capacity, remote collaboration tools, etc.).

- Provide ergonomic education and resources for workers who are working from home.

Communications

- Communicate regularly with workers. Some workers will be concerned about their safety when returning to the workplace. State your commitment to health and safety. Share your safety plan with workers and describe the precautions that are being taken to create a safe workplace.

- Explain how the workplace is following advice from your public health authority and the health and safety regulator in your jurisdiction.

- Discuss what to expect on the first day returning to the workplace. Workers may feel mixed emotions about returning to the workplace.

- Have one-on-one meetings with each worker to discuss any specific concerns they may have.

- Some Canadians have experienced increased levels of stress and anxiety during the pandemic. Offer support to workers. Provide mental health resources to workers (e.g., Government of Canada's Wellness Together Canada website). Share contact information for your Employee Assistance Program (if applicable).

- If workers require an accommodation please refer to the CCOHS document Returning to the Workplace - Preparing Workers.

- Communicate any new / updated policies and procedures (e.g., impairment).

- Remind workers about building specific procedures (e.g., emergency evacuation plans). Conduct practice drills, evaluate, and make any necessary improvements.

Phased Return to Work

- Some workers may need extra time to adjust to returning to the workplace (e.g., arranging childcare).

- Work with workers to set a flexible transition date back to the workplace (if possible).

Sustainment of Workplace Controls After Easing of Restrictions (Long-Term)

- Assign a person to monitor updates from your local public health authority and jurisdictional health and safety regulator regarding COVID-19. Follow the advice and requirements.

- Do not remove any COVID-19 workplace controls until your local public health authority and health and safety regulator states that it is no longer required for your specific type of workplace. It is possible that some workplace controls and public health measures may remain (e.g., following public health requirements for quarantine, isolation and testing).

- Conduct a review if the workplace control or public health measure is no longer a requirement or recommendation. Determine if it should be kept (sustained) in the future, revised or discontinued. Consider the benefits. For example:

  - Would the precaution help prevent the spread of other infectious diseases such as influenza?

  - What other benefits are provided by the precautions (e.g., improved indoor air quality, increased worker satisfaction, improved productivity, etc.)?

- Considerations when reviewing workplace controls are listed below.

- Screening

  - If active screening is no longer required by your jurisdiction, consider implementing passive screening and educate your workers that they should not come into the workplace if they have symptoms of an infectious disease.

- Reducing Interactions

  - Review how work practices changed to limit the number of interactions with others. Are there benefits to maintaining these changes (e.g., online ordering, contactless payment, "doorstep" deliveries, increased use of technology for virtual meetings, working from home)?

- Physical Distancing

    - Are there situations where physical distancing measures should be maintained (e.g., putting payment machine on a paddle or stick, adding markers on the floors)?

    - Do physical distancing measures help improve the personal safety and security of workers by maintaining personal space?

    - Do workers report increased satisfaction or improved productivity from having workstations that are physically distanced from others?

- Physical Barriers

    - Review where your workplace installed physical barriers. Which ones will remain?

    - Are the barriers helpful for security reasons (e.g., having a barrier between a driver and a passenger in a vehicle)?

    - Do the barriers help with privacy (i.e., having a barrier between two automated teller machines)?

    - Can the barriers help prevent the spread of respiratory droplets (e.g., from a customer sneezing or coughing at a grocery check-out)?

    - Do workers find it easy to work with the physical barriers or is it cumbersome?

    - Do the physical barriers impact productivity?

    - If a decision is made to keep the physical barriers, make sure they are regularly inspected for damage, and are secure.

    - Make sure barriers do not create any new risks (e.g., restrict vision for critical tasks).

    - If physical barriers are removed in the workplace, consider keeping them in storage (if possible) in case they are needed in the future.

- Indoor Ventilation

    - Continue to make sure that ventilation systems are working properly and are maintained according to manufacturer's instructions.

    - Proper indoor ventilation not only helps to reduce the spread of infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, but also helps improve [indoor air quality](#).

    - If your workplace implemented enhancements to the ventilation system for COVID-19 (e.g., improved filtration, increased air exchange rates) consider maintaining these changes as it will help improve indoor air quality.

- Cleaning and Disinfection

    - Establish a regular cleaning and disinfecting schedule.

    - Enhanced cleaning and disinfecting will likely not be required for non-health care workplaces unless there has been a sick person in the workplace or if there are workplace specific requirements.

- Wearing Masks

    - Follow public health advice regarding when well-constructed and well-fitting masks are required in the workplace.

    - Consider situations in the workplace where it might be helpful to continue requiring masks (e.g., waiting room areas at a doctor's office or hospital)?

- PPE Program

    - Determine if your workers will need to continue to wear PPE after the pandemic (if applicable). Are there other hazards in the workplace where PPE is required (e.g., chemical exposure, electrical hazards, construction hazards, etc.)?

    - If PPE may be used in the workplace, make sure that PPE programs are maintained. For example, if workers may be required to wear a tight-fitting respirator, make sure that respirator fit testing is conducted.

- Proper Hand Hygiene

  - Regular handwashing is one of the best ways to remove germs and to help workers avoid getting sick.

  - If working with chemicals or biological substances, proper handwashing is also important to reduce exposure.

  - Consider maintaining hand hygiene precautions (e.g., handwashing posters, placement of hand sanitizer dispensers throughout the workplace). Assign someone who is responsible for refilling hand sanitizer dispensers.

- Communication

  - During the pandemic, some workplaces increased the frequency of meetings with workers to provide regular updates and discuss any concerns.

  - Talk to workers and determine if the frequency of meetings should continue after the pandemic.

  - Continue to have regular discussions with workers about health and safety.

- Vaccines

  - Continue to promote the COVID-19 vaccine with your workers. Consider promoting other vaccines as well (e.g., annual seasonal flu vaccine).

- Commitment to Workplace Health and Safety

  - Make sure to take all reasonable precautions to protect worker's health and safety after the pandemic.

  - For all workplace hazards, use the hierarchy of controls (i.e., elimination, substitution, engineering controls, administrative policies, and the use of personal protective equipment) when deciding what measures to implement to control the hazard.

Business Continuity Plan

- Document your learnings from the pandemic (What worked well? What didn't work well?).

- Make sure that pandemics are addressed in the business continuity plan for your workplace. A business continuity plan describes how an organization will continue to function during or after an emergency, disaster, or event.

- Make sure that you have any pandemic-related supplies (e.g., hand sanitizer, PPE, cleaning, and disinfecting products) required for your workplace and that a plan is available for ordering additional supplies (if needed).

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

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