

ON COVID-19

How long does the virus live on surfaces?

A recent study found that the COVID-19 coronavirus can survive up to four hours on copper, up to 24 hours on cardboard, and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel. The researchers also found that this virus can hang out as droplets in the air for up to three hours before they fall. But most often they will fall more quickly. Since many surfaces in our workplace are made of unknown, mixed, or varied surfaces, we should assume all surfaces are contaminated for three days after a possible exposure.

What should I do if the nature of my work (i.e. lifting a heavy object) requires me and my co-workers to be closer than 2 metres to perform the task?

Social distancing is an administrative control on the risk of contracting COVID-19. Administrative controls use rules or work procedures to organize the work in such a way that contact with the hazard is reduced or eliminated. There will be times when the tasks we are performing require working in close contact. In those situations, we look to personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep us safe. The most important PPE is a mask; medical-grade surgical masks are the best option, but they are increasingly in short supply. If that is not available, then a cloth face covering provides a good level of protection, as long as both persons are wearing one. Gloves are advisable if you cannot frequently wash your hands.

My work has changed a lot because of social distancing and I'm working alone now. Is that safe?

Working alone is a hazard that magnifies every other hazard in the workplace. If you are alone and suffer an injury or medical emergency there may not be anyone available to help. A worker is "working alone" when help would not be readily available. There could be multiple people in a building who are all working alone if their duties don't bring them into regular contact with one another. To manage the risk of working alone, employers should institute programs and procedures to ensure someone verifies the wellbeing of the employee on a regular basis. It is not enough that the employee has access to a phone, as they may not be able to use it if they are seriously ill or injured.

Can I use my right to refuse for COVID-19?

Employees have a right to refuse unsafe work when there are reasonable grounds to believe that the work, tool, or equipment is dangerous to you or another person's health and safety. Many situations could create a dangerous condition in your workplace, and COVID-19 is no exception. For most workers, the presence of a communicable disease isn't automatically dangerous, as long as you have the training and appropriate resources, including personal protective equipment (PPE) to do the work safely.

If I exercise my right to refuse, do I go home?

No. Generally, the refusal is limited to the task the worker perceives as dangerous (i.e. providing care without PPE), so the worker is able to continue with other tasks while the refusal is investigated. In the rare occasion that the danger is present in all assigned work locations, they can remove themselves to the closest safe location while they report the refusal and await direction.

Do I keep working during a refusal?

The employer has the right to reassign you other tasks during a work refusal. If those tasks are also dangerous, you have the right to initiate another work refusal.

Someone else refused. Should I?

Not necessarily. The right to refuse is an individual right, and what is dangerous for one person may not be dangerous for another, depending on the knowledge, training, and experience that person has to do the task safely. Also, some people may have specific limitations due to medical conditions that make a situation dangerous for them but not others.

Do I get paid if I refuse?

Yes, a worker cannot lose wages for exercising their right to refuse. In most cases, the employer assigns alternate work so no hours are lost, but even if the employee loses hours they must still be paid.

I refused and someone else did the work. Is that ok?

Yes, the employer has the right to assign someone else to a task that has been refused. To do so, the employer must do three things: (1) advise the second worker that someone else refused the work; (2) advise them of the reasons for the refusal; and (3) inform them that they also have the right to refuse if they also have reasonable grounds to believe the work is dangerous.

How do I exercise my right to refuse?

You must report your refusal to your immediate supervisor.

I refused and the supervisor tried to fix it, but I still think it's dangerous. What can I do?

If the supervisor does not remedy the situation to your satisfaction, you have the ability to maintain your refusal by referring it to the workplace health and safety committee for investigation.

The committee investigated and I still think it's dangerous. What now?

As long as the committee did not unanimously advise you to return to work, you still have the ability to maintain your refusal by reporting it to a health and safety officer under the province's Occupational Health and Safety Act for investigation.

An officer investigated and I'm still concerned the work is dangerous. Is there anything I can do now?

All parties must abide by the results of the employer's investigation and their finding of danger or no danger. You can appeal their decision but must abide by it while the appeal is ongoing.

Can we invoke our right to refuse as a group?

No, the right to refuse is individual and each person that refuses must have reasonable grounds that the work they have been assigned is likely to endanger their health and safety. If a group of workers each decide to refuse, they must each report their refusal and their specific reasons to their immediate supervisor.

If I think I have come in contact with the virus, what should I do? Can I go home?

If the exposure happened at work then, like any hazard or injury, you must report the incident to your employer. In some health care workplaces, there may be occupational health nurses on site who initiate the next steps; if not you should contact 811 to inquire about how to obtain a test. Being exposed to an infected person does not mean that you are necessarily infected, but depending on the nature of the exposure, public health may direct you to be tested.

How do we practice social distancing at work?

To the best of your ability. Many public sector workers are in workplaces that have been deemed essential and will continue to operate during the pandemic. In this context, social distancing is a hazard control and must be followed whenever possible. Work should be arranged to minimize the direct contact workers have with one another and with clients/the public. In cases where distance cannot be maintained, frequent handwashing, disinfecting of commonly touched surfaces and PPE is recommended.

My co-workers aren't practicing social distancing. What can I do?

Social distancing is now a form of "safe work procedure" in use by most workplaces. Just like with any other safety protocols, if they are not being followed, that creates an unsafe situation that should be reported to the employer. Reporting is not the same thing as "ratting"; reporting gets someone out of trouble (such as by ensuring protocols that protect us all are being followed), "ratting" is getting someone else in trouble without enhancing safety for others.

I'm immune compromised. Should I get a doctor note to say it's not safe for me to work?

The guidance from most public health officials is that it is safe for someone who is in the high-risk group to continue working as long as they can maintain social distancing or, if PPE is required, that the person can properly don and doff (put on and take off) their PPE. That being said, every case is unique, and we would encourage you to discuss your concerns with your doctor.

My workplace only has a temporary outdoor toilet. Is that safe?

A washroom inside or outdoors is a shared space that could have been contaminated if an infected person has used it. Our first line of defense is access control; if the workplace controls access to the washroom and ensures that people with symptoms are not present in the workplace, then the risk has been reduced. There is the potential of asymptomatic transmission (from a person without symptoms) so any shared surfaces should be clean and disinfected on a regular basis. Good hand washing (or use of hand sanitizer) is critically important to protecting yourself. Even if you come in contact with respiratory droplets from an infected person, they still need to make their way into your body through a mucus membrane (usually the mouth). Handwashing can remove the virus from your hands before it can infect your body.

I don't have a clean place to eat at work. Is that ok?

It is important that you have a way to wash or sanitize your hands before eating. The virus is spread by respiratory droplets from an infected person that make their way into your body, often via your hands and mouth. To avoid infecting yourself from respiratory droplets that you may have unknowingly come into contact with, you should thoroughly wash your hands before eating. The cleanliness of your hands is much more important than the cleanliness of the surrounding environment.

When do I need to use Personal Protective Equipment?

COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets, so the best defense is keeping a sufficient distance from others (at least 2 meters). PPE would most commonly be used if you must come into close contact with another person or are cleaning an area that was occupied by others. Appropriate PPE would include a mask to cover your mouth, and gloves to protect your hands. Lacking any of these resources would make the work more hazardous and could lead to a dangerous situation.

What if I'm not comfortable using my PPE?

PPE is only effective if used properly, which means training on how to put on and take off (donning and doffing) PPE as well as information on its appropriate uses and limitations. Generally, training includes a qualified person demonstrating the task and then observing you doing the same, to verify you are able to do so. Printed handouts and videos are informative and can be good refreshers but may not enable a worker to obtain the necessary skills in donning and doffing PPE. Lacking these skills could lead to a dangerous situation.

What types of precautions can we take if we don't have Personal Protective Equipment?

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) must be used anytime we are coming into contact with an individual that is a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19. That PPE would include a mask, gown, gloves and eye protection (face shield or goggles). There is no substitute for PPE, and any members being asked to work without appropriate PPE are reminded that they have a right to refuse unsafe work. More on that here:

cupe.ca/refusing-unsafe-work-its-your-right.

Would a mixture of bleach and water in a spray bottle be sufficient to clean surfaces that may be contaminated?

Yes, bleach is an effective disinfectant when used in the proper concentrations. The CDC in the US has a good resource for identifying the best cleaning products and concentrations to use on various surfaces: cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-disinfection.html.

What can we use for cleaning surfaces if Lysol wipes are not available?

The CDC resources on cleaning and disinfecting has good guidance on practices for cleaning and disinfecting various surfaces: cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cleaning-disinfection.html.