

Workplace Safety & Prevention Services

Guidance on Health and Safety for Office Administration and Secretarial Staff during COVID-19

OVERVIEW

This is not a legal document and employers are advised to seek legal advice.

Employers and constructors have obligations to protect workers from hazards in the workplace as set out in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations and the directives coming from the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

Workers should raise any concerns to their:

- supervisor
- joint health and safety committee
- health and safety representative

This will help ensure the employer has taken all reasonable precautions.

Ontario is currently in the midst of a global pandemic. While the COVID-19 situation is changing rapidly, the legislation and regulations used to govern Ontario's workplaces are not.

Under Ontario law, employers have the duty to keep workers and work sites safe and free of hazards. Workers have the right to refuse unsafe work. If health and safety concerns are not resolved internally, a worker can seek enforcement by filing a complaint with the ministry's Health and Safety Contact Centre at 1-877-202-0008. Failure of the employer or constructor to comply with the OHSA and its regulations could result in a stop-work order upon inspection by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

BEST PRACTICES

We know that every workplace is unique. That makes it so important that every workplace assess functions carried out by their workforce to ensure they take action to protect against the hazards presented by COVID-19.

Things like proper hand hygiene, keeping surfaces and objects clean and physical distancing (staying 2 metres apart) to prevent close contact with potentially infected people are all critically important measures. Other information on how you can protect yourself is available on ontario.ca/coronavirus.

We have provided some protection advice below for your consideration. Please keep in mind that introducing any new protective measures should be done as part of a full review of other workplace hazards -- not just COVID 19 alone. Employers should consult with Joint Health and Safety Committees/Health and Safety Representatives in the workplace on measures to protect workers in the workplace. We want to ensure we enhance our safety, not cause other issues.

Some workplaces already have some existing controls in place that may help reduce the risk of exposure to workers as well, so regular 'check-ins' on how controls are helping is highly recommended.

RECOGNIZE HAZARD/ASSESS RISKS

For Office Administration and Secretarial workers, we recognize that you may have contact with surfaces including the keyboard and mouse, printer/photocopier, and shared work desks as you go about your work. You could also potentially come in contact with droplets from these interactions. COVID-19 can travel in respiratory droplets that are released into the environment by laughing, coughing or sneezing.

Take a look at where you might minimize those risks within your workplace. Consult public health information to learn the symptoms of COVID-19 infection. Recognize and report these hazards and use appropriate controls. Ensure that you or your co-workers stay home if you or they have symptoms.

We understand – so it's important to take a look at where you can possibly minimize those risks within your workplace. Take a look at the controls below to see how they may assist you.

CONTROLS

To protect yourself from some of these hazards consider the following options:

- Be sure to keep up with good hand washing and avoid touching your face. Extra handwashing is a good idea for everyone – and when that's not possible, a good hand sanitizer should be used frequently and kept nearby. Consider setting a practice like disinfecting your hands and any surfaces touched after each interaction
- Integrate physical distancing in activities. Are there tasks you can minimize or eliminate? For example, can the work you do be done alone or be done from home?
- Consider job task rotation if it will assist in ensuring physical distancing guidelines are met at all times. For example, staggering breaks and lunches
- Is it possible to control how many people you're interacting with? Physical distancing is recommended, so if you can ensure distance between clients or co-workers and yourself. Consider controlling entry points to designated work areas and limiting the number of people in a work area.
- Is there an opportunity to put barriers in place between yourself and people you have to interact with? For example, a 'window' with open/close capability between interactions.
- Is there an opportunity to improve fresh air intake/air circulation? Increased airflow can help minimize opportunities for these kinds of hazards to build up.
- Increase your cleaning frequency – on everything from keyboards and mouse to photocopiers and commonly shared office items. Be sure to follow safe practices and use an appropriate cleaning agent.
- Keep up with the best. Consider regular times to check in with public health updates and retrain/revise practices as needed.

If the above recommendations are still not enough for your workplace, as a last resort, consider Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). PPE is only effective if people wear it correctly. Ensure PPE training includes the fit, use, care, putting on and taking off, maintenance, cleaning and limitations of the PPE.

Some examples of PPE that may be suited to office administration and secretarial work include:

- Gloves – single use gloves can help limit contact with surfaces, product etc. Be sure you have practices set up for suitable disposal and when gloves should be changed. It's also important, again, to ensure you consider other hazards that may be present in the workplace before introducing gloves – in some cases, gloves can be an 'entanglement' hazard and should not be worn.
- Goggles or face shields – can help with barriers and separation too. They should be assigned to people and not shared and can be used regularly if kept clean. Ensure the goggle or face shield use does not result in workers touching their faces more often because of heat or discomfort.

EVALUATION

COVID 19 has presented all of us with challenges we have never seen before. It's important to consider that any of the adjustments we are making today, may need further adjustment tomorrow.

It is recommended that you take a look at your preventative measures on an ongoing basis, and adjust them if they are not working well enough or causing other issues with your work. For example, if you decided to use goggles, but they are fogging up and making other tasks unnecessarily difficult, you may want to try a face shield instead. Or if you decided you needed a certain kind of disinfectant and it's no longer available, switching to good soap and water practices may be a reasonable substitute.

Bottom line? Plan to make regular check-ins part of *your* COVID 19 prevention plans.

RESOURCES

Stay updated with daily government updates on COVID-19:

[Government of Ontario](#)

[Government of Canada](#)

[Public Health Ontario](#)

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. It is not intended as medical advice, to provide a comprehensive risk assessment for all workplaces, or to replace any legislated workplace safety obligations. 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 Organisation \(WHO\)](#), [Ontario Ministry of Health, Public Health Ontario](#) and the [Centres for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)." Any use which is made of this document by any Employer, or any reliance on or decisions to be made based on it, are the responsibility of the Employer. 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.