

Returning to work from COVID-19 closure

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It has likely been a number of weeks since the majority of workers have been in the physical workplace. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to confront us, there is movement to slowly re-open parts of the economy, including our workplaces, in order to restore the economic health of the country. This planned return to work must not be at the expense of workers' health and safety. This is a challenge to employers, who have a responsibility to maintain the health and safety of employees while operating a viable business venture; it is also a challenge for workers who have to protect their personal health and safety as well as that of their families at home.

“Nothing is more important than your health and safety.” This must be kept in mind as you do your job on a daily basis in order to return home safely to your family. Remember that the employer has the responsibility and legal duty to do everything reasonable in the circumstances to protect you from hazards in the workplace, including exposure to the SARS-CoV-2 virus better known as the disease COVID-19. You as a worker have the duty to follow the procedures and wear the equipment given to you, as well as a duty to notify your employer about health and safety concerns. The basic workplace safety rules and responsibilities have not changed and the Internal Responsibility System is still expected to function with respect to health and safety issues in all workplaces. As workers, you still have the same workplace rights that you have always had, including the right to know about hazards, participate in workplace safety and the right to refuse unsafe work if you believe you are being endangered.

Keeping this information in mind **your employer is expected to put together a return to work plan that incorporates the principles and practices that have been learned and established across all industries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This must be done in consultation with your workplace's JH&SC (Joint Health and Safety Committee) and union leadership.** Each workplace is different and there is not a “one size fits all plan,” but the following basic key elements are essential:

1. You should notice many changes when you return to work in the “old” workplace. You should be educated on the employer's return to work protocols and procedures implemented in your workplace. These protocols have been put in place to protect you.

2. You will be expected to follow these protocols and procedures in order to help mitigate the risk of contracting COVID-19 at work and home.
3. You should have a very good idea of the amount of work that was done while you were away to help clean and sanitize the facility. Expect a list of what was done and by whom.
4. There should be work schedule changes with staggered shift start times to allow for social distancing so that all employees do not congregate at entrances and exits or on breaks and other work times.
5. Social distancing of 1-2m should be maintained at all times if possible. The facility should have attempted to maintain worker mobility without having to touch doors, receptacles and other high touch areas as much as possible.
6. The employer should have dedicated more resources to cleaning the facility now that work has or will begin.
7. Everyone should understand their role in their return to work process. Clear role definitions and training for everyone will be necessary in varying degrees.

Signs and symptoms of COVID-19

Symptoms can include fever, cough, and shortness of breath. Other symptoms include aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat and diarrhea. It is recommended that you voluntarily monitor your health by completing a daily self-assessment.

If anyone needs special accommodations, they should be provided help. Accommodations should be provided to those employees:

- 65 and over;
- with chronic lung diseases or severe asthma;
- with serious heart conditions;
- who are immune-compromised;
- with severe obesity;
- with diabetes;
- with chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis;
- with liver disease;
- who are pregnant.

On-site screening for symptoms of COVID-19

To prevent spread of this disease and reduce the potential risk of exposure, temperature and health screening must be in place during this crisis. Your participation is very important to help take the precautionary measures to protect everyone in the workplace.

On-site screening must be done by trained and competent personnel who will ask questions, assess employees for overt signs or symptoms and take each employee's temperature using a non-touch thermometer. This should be done for each employee prior to the shift start. The screening location should be at the entrance of the workplace. During the screening, if an employee reports symptoms or direct exposure to COVID-19, the employee will be invited to go to the isolation area. If the employee's temperature is 38°C or higher or if the employee exhibits visible symptoms of illness consistent with COVID-19, the employee will also be invited to the isolation area.

Symptomatic Employee Isolation Protocol (at work)

If workers feel symptomatic for COVID-19 at work, they must contact their leader or supervisor immediately. They will then be taken to the designated isolation area for further evaluation. Anyone coming in contact with this worker from this point forward will be required to wear personal protective equipment (PPE). Once the symptomatic employee arrives at the isolation area, they will be given a mask and gloves to help protect other employees and prevent the spread of any potential virus. A COVID-19 form will be filled out by the isolation coordinator. If the employee is suspected to have COVID-19 symptoms, they will be sent home or directly to a health centre and will need medical clearance to return to work.

Suspected Symptoms

If an employee suspects that they have symptoms of COVID-19, all employees will be notified through the established communication channel. The employee will remain anonymous. If symptoms are suspected in the facility, then all surfaces touched by the employee will be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

If an Employee Tests Positive for COVID-19

The employee is to contact HR who will discuss next steps and required documentation before the employee can return to work. It is expected that the employee will follow self-quarantine protocols as well as return to work requirements. All employees will be notified through the communication channel that a co-worker has tested positive. Employees who came in contact with direct exposure of less than 1m to the COVID-19 positive employee will be directed to follow self-quarantine protocols. Medical clearance will be required before return to work by those affected and directed to self-quarantine.

Collective Efforts to Prevent Spread and Avoid Infection

Social distancing is effective and simple as a mechanism to prevent potential infection.

- Stay at least 1m to 2m from others as a normal practice.
- Eliminate contact such as handshakes or embracing coworkers.
- Avoid high touch surfaces as much as possible.

- Avoid anyone that appears to be sick, is coughing or sneezing.
- In the workplace, ensure social distancing on production lines, cafeterias, meeting areas, entrances and exits and offices.

Disinfection

Disinfection measures must have been put in place to disinfect workplace surfaces, chairs, tables and to protect employees. The facility must have been completely sanitized and disinfected before reopening. This standard of cleanliness must be upheld with the disinfection protocol. If an active employee is confirmed positive for COVID-19 by a medical doctor, a deep cleaning will again be carried out. The employer's infection control team must be trained and equipped to use PPE to deal with potentially harmful chemicals used in sanitation. Employees are encouraged to use good personal sanitary practices including washing hands after bathroom use, covering coughs, maintaining social distancing, and cleaning work areas or other visited areas. Workers must be supplied with the necessary items to keep their area clean.

Shift Changes

Shift changes must be managed to reduce infection risk and allow for opportunities to ensure optimal disinfection of the work environment. Entrances and exits should be stationed with personnel to ensure social distancing. Doors should be propped open to alleviate touching. Necessary high touch areas will need to be cleaned and disinfected. Workers should avoid gathering in crowds and enter the facility at their scheduled window of time. Avoid touching turnstiles or other items with your bare hands. Workers are reminded not touch their face before they have a chance to wash their hands.

Common Surfaces and Work Stations

Common surfaces must be disinfected at the end of each shift as a minimum, more often if necessary. Workers are reminded to avoid touching their faces and are encouraged and given time to wash hands thoroughly with soap and water several times during the work hours. Workstations should be arranged 1m to 2m apart, if possible. Operators should be instructed to perform work in their own work areas. Any concerns should be communicated with the zone or group leader or supervisor. Self-cleaning of the workspaces should be encouraged multiple times during the shift with special attention on the most used surfaces.

Breaks and Cafeterias

Break times should be separated to allow enough time to wipe tables, eating surfaces, refrigerators, vending machines and microwave ovens. These areas should be cleaned often during each shift. Employees should be reminded to clean up after themselves, wash hands or use hand sanitizer before and after lunch. Social distancing must be maintained.

Bathrooms

Urinals and sink stations should be marked so that social distancing can be maintained. Maximum capacities should be labeled on entrances. Bathrooms should be disinfected at least four times per shift. When possible, the use of the elbows to open doors and press buttons should be promoted.

Locker Rooms

Lockers should be reassigned to limit capacity and increased distancing if used regularly or are necessary. Locker room floors and hard surfaces must be mopped and cleaned daily. Commonly touched objects must be disinfected throughout the day. The maintaining of social distancing in these areas is important.

Common Areas

All walls and floors must be disinfected periodically; hard surfaces must be mopped daily. Workers should be reminded to avoid touching surfaces touched by others to the extent possible. Ensure social distancing is maintained. The avoidance of non-essential gatherings and contact with others must be stressed.

Offices

Desks should be reassigned or blocked to ensure separation of employees. Meeting rooms should ensure that social distancing can be maintained. Remote work is preferred to reduce the number of employees in the facility. All general walls and floors must be disinfected periodically. Hard surfaces must be mopped daily. Self-cleaning of the workspace is encouraged daily with special attention to most used surfaces such as keyboards, monitors, chairs desks and cubicle dividers.

Personal Hygiene

Washing hands is the most effective way to reduce the spread of infectious diseases. Workers should be trained to presume that their hands are contaminated with viruses and bacteria after touching common surfaces, as well as anything touched thereafter. Employees should wash their hands upon entering the workplace and before going back home. Hands should also be washed before and after food preparation and before eating and drinking, as well as before and after toilet use, processing garbage, blowing one's nose, coughing or sneezing, handling animals or animal waste, changing diapers, visiting sick people or before taking medication.

The Correct Method to Wash Hands

When washing hands with soap and water wet your hands with warm (if available) clean running water and apply soap. Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces. Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds. Dry your hands using a paper towel or air drier. If soap and water are not available, then use alcohol-based hand sanitizer liberally.

Do not touch you face including your mouth, eyes, nose, or ears. Viruses on your hands are not harmful to you unless you physically transfer them to an entry spot on the body, so do not touch your face.

Cover Coughs and Sneezes

Never cough or sneeze into your hands as they then pass viruses to common surfaces and infect others. Use a tissue to cough or sneeze into the bend of your elbow. The virus on your hands causes no harm until you touch your face or contaminate others who do so. Your eyes, nose and mouth are the prime area entry points for viruses and bacteria.

Keep Personal Devices Clean

Employees are reminded to ensure personal items that are touched especially those that touch the face, like cell phones, are kept clean. Avoid touching them after you have touched common surfaces and clean them frequently.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Personal protective equipment is used for employees that may come into direct contact with COVID-19 positive employees and for workers involved in cleaning and disinfection. It is not recommended or required that employees wear gloves in normal circumstances. Ensure that workers are reminded to discuss any concerns with their leader or supervisor.

Information to Share

All employees should be given contact phone numbers for:

- Emergency number in the plant;
- First aid department;
- Human Resources.

Any external or internal communication or information portals should also be shared with employees.

The return to work after COVID-19 will not be an easily transitioned, smooth, business as usual event. Even the best developed and implemented plans usually fail in some aspect during their first test with reality. A robust, well-developed plan that has the support of the employer, the JH&SC and union leadership will go a long way into a functional transitioning of the workplace in a COVID-19 world.

These changes will become the new normal for the foreseeable future until a vaccine is found, mass testing is developed or the vast majority of the population is exposed and has recovered.

This COVID-19 Pandemic should be regarded from the perspective of a marathon and not a sprint.

Keeping ourselves healthy and safe must be our first priority. Everyone has a role to play. Know your rights and use them. There is no job that is so important that it cannot be done safely!

Sources

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