

# COVID-19 Fact Sheet

Mar 17, 2020

## What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is caused by a virus from the same family as the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) coronavirus. **According to Health Canada**, coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that can cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases.

Those who are infected with COVID-19 may have little to no symptoms. You may not know you have symptoms of COVID-19 because they are similar to a cold or flu.

Symptoms may include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Difficulty breathing
- Pneumonia in both lungs

## Transmission

Though it has been determined that the virus can spread from person to person, how exactly the virus is transmitted remains unclear. There continues to be a debate over whether or not COVID-19 transmission is “airborne”. However, it is the position of CUPE that in the absence of a definitive proof, a conclusion that COVID-19 is “not airborne” is not appropriate and the precautionary principle should apply.

For CUPE members that are working with infected (or potentially infected people), we recommend the use of a fit-tested N95 mask and eye protection like a face shield. This includes front-line health care workers, acute care providers, paramedics, and flight attendants who deal with symptomatic passengers, just to name a few. Additional

precautions should be implemented for health care workers doing patient care that requires aerosol generating procedures (such as intubation, airway suction etc.), which require higher levels of protection.

### **What we learned from SARS – follow the “precautionary principle”**

In the aftermath of the SARS outbreak, Ontario established a commission to look at the introduction and spread of SARS. In its **final report**, Commissioner Justice Archie Campbell wrote that “we cannot wait for scientific certainty before we take reasonable steps to reduce risk”.

Campbell’s report identified the precautionary principle as an approach for protecting workers in circumstances of scientific uncertainty. This reflects the need to take prudent action in the face of potentially serious viruses without having to wait for complete scientific proof that a course of action is necessary. This means that unless we know with certainty that the virus is not spread through the air, we must conduct ourselves as if it were.

### **Common practices still hold**

To help reduce the likelihood of becoming infected by any viral infection, common practices still hold:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Practice physical distancing where possible.

### **Occupational safety**

When new viruses are identified, employers, in consultation with their health and safety committees or worker representatives, should follow an appropriate hazard-assessment methodology that looks at the virus and considers if existing controls are appropriate. The goal of a prevention plan must be to eliminate exposure to the infectious virus as much as possible. The selection of controls should be guided by a hierarchy of controls and

include both engineering and administrative controls. More information is provided in the general COVID guideline (found below).

**Note:** The use of surgical-type masks does not provide adequate protection from viral exposure. N95 respirators usually grant minimal protection. All workers who are fit-tested with N95 respirators must carry identification indicating the type and size of their respirator. Additionally, workers need to receive training on all aspects of personal protective equipment (putting on, wearing, removal, disposal, etc.).

### **What's next?**

CUPE will continue to monitor and advise our members when there are any significant changes. Please review the document below for additional information and check back frequently for updates.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

 [Coronavirus COVID-19 : A Q&A Guide for CUPE Health Care Workers in Ontario](#)