

COVID-19 at work

COVID-19 (a coronavirus) is not typically an occupational illness. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses. Some cause respiratory illness in people, ranging from mild common colds to severe illnesses.

COVID-19 is a new coronavirus that had not been previously identified in humans. It is believed to be spread mainly by coughing, sneezing or direct close contact with someone who is sick with COVID-19 or with surfaces they have recently touched.

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. Recent evidence indicates that the virus can be transmitted to others from someone who is infected but not showing symptoms.

This includes people who:

- have not yet developed symptoms (pre-symptomatic)
- never develop symptoms (asymptomatic)

Symptoms may take up to 14 days to appear after exposure to COVID-19. In severe cases, infection can lead to death.

(Sources: [Government of Canada](#), [Alberta Health Services](#))

How does a non-occupational illness become an occupational hazard?

While most cases of COVID-19 are not occupational, the illness may become an occupational hazard when work duties place a worker at increased risk of exposure to infected people, thus increasing their risk of developing the illness.

This may also be the case when an infected person (a guest, contractor, supervisor, worker, etc.) brings the virus into the workplace which can lead to a cluster of infections, causing a facility outbreak.

Workers required to work in the facility are now at greater risk of working with people who are infected and/or coming into frequent contact with infected surfaces, even when they do not have contact with the general public.

Each case reported to WCB is investigated to confirm level of risk, likely source of infection and work-relatedness. If there is evidence the infection occurred outside of work, the condition would not be work-related.

What is an outbreak at work?

An outbreak is a sudden and/or unexpected rise in the number of cases of a disease. An outbreak may occur in a community, camp, facility or geographical area.

An “outbreak” is typically declared by a medical health authority. We have seen outbreaks of Norwalk Virus and others in the past in health facilities and camps. The Government of Alberta is posting some outbreak information [on its information site](#).

Locations of outbreaks in acute care and continuing care facilities are reported publicly when there are two or more cases, indicating that a transmission within the facility has occurred.

Outbreaks at other facilities or in the community are reported publicly when there are five or more cases.

Multiple cases in a workplace may lead to declaration of an outbreak. COVID-19 is highly contagious and an outbreak can occur very quickly.

What does a workplace outbreak mean from a WCB perspective?

When multiple employees in the workplace have a confirmed diagnosis of the disease, workers at that site may have a greater risk of contracting the infectious disease than the general public.

Why do these claims need to be reported?

These cases need to be reported so WCB can investigate work relatedness. As an outbreak in the workplace may have put workers at greater risk of contracting the disease than the general public, the condition may be covered through the workers' compensation system.

Should I submit a claim if I suspect an outbreak?

Report to WCB when multiple workers at your facility have symptoms or a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis. This would apply even if there is no direct work with the general public.

Note: If your employees work directly with the general public, you should report each case as it is identified.

If the outbreak is first reported to be community-based, do I still need to report?

Yes, if there are also multiple positive cases in the workplace, claims should be submitted for adjudication to determine whether the circumstances in the workplace are putting workers at a greater risk to contracting the disease. A facility outbreak may occur in tandem with a community outbreak. Every claim will be adjudicated to determine eligibility.

How does WCB determine if the illness is work-related?

Once a claim is reported, WCB will investigate to determine if the employment circumstances resulted in a greater risk of infection or if there is evidence to support the condition was contracted outside the workplace.

Give us a call if you are unsure of the coverage available or if you should report. You can reach us at 1-866-498-4694 and one of our industry support specialists can assist you.

Additional information about COVID-19 as it relates to workers' compensation is [found here](#).

