

# COVID-19 and infectious diseases

## Guidance and recommendations for employers

### Background

At the time of this bulletin's publication, the COVID-19 pandemic has had its grips on the world for the past year and a half. As employers begin to re-open their workplaces and return to work routines resembling pre-pandemic activity, the question of what to do about COVID-19 and other disease-related hazards in the post-pandemic world is on the minds of many workers, leaders, and safety professionals.



COVID-19 contraction and the resulting illness can be a [Workers' Compensation Board \(WCB\) claim](#) [1]. Additionally, Alberta Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) has stated many times that [COVID-19 is a hazard](#) for which employers must conduct hazard assessments and apply appropriate controls as necessary – despite the presence or absence of a Provincial public health order [2].

The Alberta Motor Transport Association (AMTA) does not recommend employers drop all safety controls against COVID-19 and other diseases just because Provincial public health restrictions have been lifted. Employers are responsible for the health of their workers while at work [3] and it is fair to say hazards related to infectious diseases deserve care and attention when creating and revising formal hazard assessments. Workplaces may have unique requirements requiring enhanced health protocols despite government mandates being removed.

In this AMTA bulletin, we will provide information and links to resources for employers – both Federally and Provincially regulated – that can guide health and safety planning for workplaces with respect to COVID-19 and similar contagious diseases. As mandatory public health restrictions ease, employers are left to decide for themselves how best to handle health-related hazards. This is a daunting task, so read on to learn how to tackle this challenge.

### Hazard assessments and infectious disease

COVID-19 has forced employers to look at disease in their hazard assessments when such hazards may have been ignored in the past. Going forward, it is a fair prediction that greater expectations will be placed on employers in relation to assessing contagious disease hazards and implementing controls.

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### Hazard assessments and infectious disease continued...

In 2009, the H1N1 flu ran across Canada prompting increased public health awareness and restrictions in health care facilities [4]. This was a time when hand sanitizer stations became common sights at the entrances of public buildings. COVID-19 prompted far broader and deeper restrictions, but what is clear is that contagious diseases represent hazards that appear regularly throughout recent history.

Both Provincial and Federal Occupational Health and Safety enforcement officers will expect to see the hazards posed by COVID-19 included in employer hazard assessments [2 and 5, respectively]. In fact, the [Government of Canada's website](#) uses the language “biological hazard such as COVID-19” when referring to hazards employers must consider in their hazard prevention planning [5]. What this language shows is that instead of focusing only on hazards from COVID-19, all biological hazards like infectious diseases require employer attention.

The bottom line is that employers should not be quick to toss out the elements of their safety program that relate to COVID-19 as the current pandemic begins to ease. There may also be an increased expectation in the post-COVID world that Albertan employers keep informed on public health hazards and address them in their safety programs as needed: the following sections will expand on these topics.

### Monitoring relevant public health sources

The [World Health Organisation](#) has described the negative effects from the sharing of incorrect information as an “infodemic” [6]. The sheer quantity of information from different sources on social media has contributed to pervasive feelings of anxiety and of being overwhelmed, and the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) recommends that those experiencing anxiety limit the time they spend on social media and news platforms that constantly cover COVID-19 [7].

Employers should limit their sources of information related to public health to a small number of credible sources. Not only will this save time but taking information directly from organisations like government agencies that make and enforce rules and standards related to health hazards ensures information is as accurate as can reasonably be expected.

Here are some sources that can provide accurate information related to the current COVID-19 pandemic and other public health hazards:

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### Monitoring relevant public health sources continued...

- Government of Alberta's [Key Initiatives webpage](#) [8]
- Alberta Health Services' [Active Health Advisories webpage](#) [9]
- Government of Canada's [Public Health Agency of Canada webpage](#) [10]
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [Prepare Your Health webpage](#) [11; American]

A quick scan of these sources prior to each regularly-scheduled formal hazard assessment review will help employers manage and prepare for health hazards while limiting the time spent searching for credible information. This is not a definitive list, but the above sources represent government health departments which are good places for employers to find accurate information.

### Being prepared for restrictions

In Alberta, public health restrictions have changed frequently over the course of the pandemic. Cycling occupancy limits, mask mandates, and business activities have highlighted the importance of nimble flexibility for business leaders and workers alike.

At the writing of this bulletin, Alberta has lifted nearly all COVID-related public health restrictions and municipalities have largely done the same. However, we recommend employers remain prepared for restrictions to be re-imposed.

What does it mean to remain prepared for future restrictions? This means employers should assess their operations to decide what COVID-related controls are appropriate to remove given their specific business needs. Furthermore, being prepared means keeping controls accessible for quick redeployment if needed.

If possible, employers should save and maintain their signs, plexiglass barriers, personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies, hand sanitizing stations, policies, and all other controls they have implemented since the start of the pandemic. The equipment and procedures employers have created for the pandemic represent an investment, and this investment can be made to further serve the organisation if it is maintained in a way that is can be used for possible future restrictions or even future infectious disease outbreaks.

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### Summary

A lot has been asked of employers during the pandemic to protect the health of their workers, and employers will continue to be asked to assess their operations for hazards related to COVID and other diseases. Appropriate controls for these health hazards will need to be implemented. Employers may find it prudent, for example, to maintain a workplace mask mandate when social distancing is not practical even if there are no formal government mandates.

Incorporating contagious diseases into health and safety programs will help organisations prepare for future events and emergencies. It will also form part of an employer's demonstratable due diligence. In short, we can and should celebrate the end of a pandemic, but hard-learned lessons can be used to reduce the impact of similar events in the future.

### Need Help? Contact AMTA

AMTA can provide carriers with guidance on the information presented in this bulletin. If you have any questions, please contact AMTA and our experienced staff will be happy to help. For your safety and compliance questions, please email Workplace Support Services (WSS) directly at [wss@amta.ca](mailto:wss@amta.ca).

For more updates like this on a variety of topics related to the trucking industry, [please sign up for our eNews](#).

### References

- 1 - "COVID-19", Workers' Compensation Board - Alberta, accessed July 6, 2021, [WFS\\_COVID-19.pdf \(wcb.ab.ca\)](#)
- 2 - "COVID-19 as a workplace hazard", OHS eNews - Special Edition June 30, 2021, accessed July 6, 2021, [covidohs.pdf \(aarfp.com\)](#)
- 3 - "Obligations of Employers", Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Act, accessed July 6, 2021, [Alberta Queen's Printer](#):
- 4 - "H1N1 Flu of 2009 in Canada", The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed July 7, 2021, [H1N1 Flu of 2009 in Canada | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)
- 5 - "Labour Program and federally regulated workplaces - COVID-19", Government of Canada, accessed July 7, 2021, [Labour Program and federally regulated workplaces - COVID-19 - Canada.ca](#)
- 6 - "Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation", World Health Organization, accessed July 7, 2021, [Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation \(who.int\)](#)
- 7 - "Covid-19: Tips for managing anxiety", Canadian Mental Health Association, accessed July 7, 2021, [Covid-19: Tips for managing anxiety \(cmha.bc.ca\)](#)
- 8 - "Key Initiatives: Priority Government of Alberta initiatives and action plans.", Government of Alberta, accessed July 7, 2021, [Key initiatives | Alberta.ca](#)
- 9 - "Active Health Advisories", Alberta Health Services, accessed July 7, 2021, [Active Health Advisories | Alberta Health Services](#)
- 10 - "Public Health Agency of Canada", Government of Canada, accessed July 7, 2021, [Public Health Agency of Canada - Canada.ca](#)
- 11 - "Prepare Your Health", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed July 7, 2021, [Prepare Your Health | CDC](#)