Introduction

The "COVID-19 Protocols for Office Workplaces" is developed to support offices in reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace. It provides guidance on assessing the hazard presented by the COVID-19 virus in the office environment and describes both required and recommended controls to address that hazard. It is to be used as a basis for a "Workplace COVID-19 Prevention Plan" specific to your workplace.

Many of the specific requirements in this guidance document depend on the COVID-19 Public Health Order. As the requirements of the Order do change from time to time, your "Workplace COVID-19 Prevention Plan" should be reviewed whenever there is an update to the Order to ensure it still meets all the requirements.

Assess the hazards

Hazard assessment means taking a careful look at the workplace to determine what harms exist for workers, above and beyond the usual hazards of the workplace, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first being the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus itself, with and without symptoms being present.

COVID-19 is spread by the respiratory droplets an infected person produces when they breathe, cough, sneeze, talk, shout or sing. Physical contact with an infected person or contaminated surface may also increase the risk of infection. The virus enters the body through the throat, nose and eyes. The risk of transmission increases with close human interactions that include:

1. Close-contact settings (standing or sitting within 2 meters /6 feet; increased duration of close contact increases risk)

2. Closed spaces with poor ventilation

3. Crowded work environments with many people nearby

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The workplace should be reviewed to identify the potential exposure risks based on the above routes of transmission. In particular, review the many ways that people may interact, such as, one-on-one in small groups, informal and formal meetings and, interactions with clients or customers, staff to staff interactions and managers to staff interactions. The assessment should also consider any additional hazards introduced or increased due to potential staff shortages, either because of sickness or controls (see below).

Implement controls

Once the hazard assessment is complete, the next step is to implement controls to address the risks of exposure identified in the hazard assessment. These should be implemented based on the hierarchy of controls. Whenever possible, the most effective or highest level of control should be used to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Most likely, you will use a combination of control strategies to address the risk.
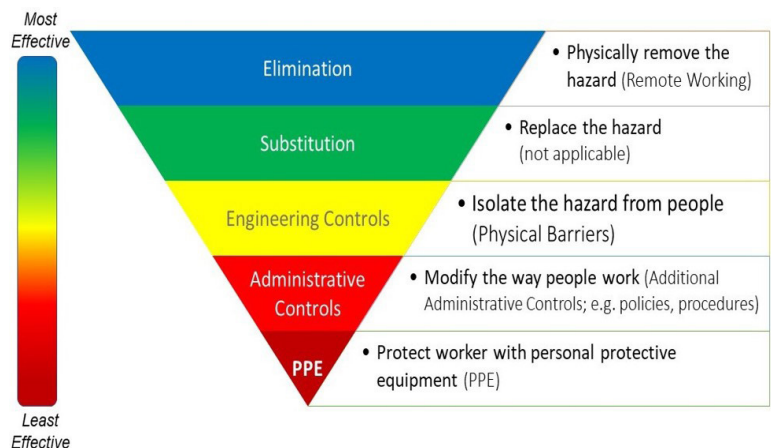
The minimum **MANDATORY** controls which must be implemented to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace are:

• **Physical distancing** of at least 2 metres / 6 feet must be maintained as much as possible.

• **Gathering Limits**, as given in the Public Health Order, must be followed in meeting rooms, common areas, or any other location people may gather. Regardless of the current gathering limit, ensure **physical distancing** can be maintained.

While non-medical masks are not mandatory in office settings under the public health order, it is strongly recommended that workplaces adopt policies of requiring them in common spaces, in areas where there is interaction with the public, and in areas where physical distance cannot be maintained.

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Other control measures to consider can include:

Elimination	
Working remotely	• When possible, allow employees to work from home. • Limit tasks needing to be done in the office.
Employee self-assessment	• Employees should not come to work if experiencing any COVID symptoms. • If symptomatic, book a test using the COVID-19 self-assessment tool. • Follow any requirements for self isolation as a result of travel, testing, or as otherwise advised by Public Health.
Gathering Limits	• Current Public Health Order for gathering limits **MUST** be followed when planning meetings or other potential group activities in the workplace. • Minimize non-essential in person gatherings, especially social gathering. • Meet virtually instead of in person. • Limit non-essential workplace visits.

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Substitution

Hazard substitution is a hazard control strategy in which a material or process is replaced with another that is less hazardous. Given that is not possible with the COVID-19 virus, substitution is not an applicable control measure.

Engineering controls	
Physical Barriers	• When 2 metre / 6 feet distancing cannot be maintained, physical barriers may be an appropriate alternative. • Barriers must be constructed with a hard material that does not allow liquid to penetrate or air to pass through (i.e. non-porous) and that is easily cleanable and allows for proper disinfection. • Partitions need to be large and high enough to extend well beyond the breathing zone of users (minimum of 2 feet above a standing position). The breathing zone is the immediate air space in which a person breathes and can be visualized as a bubble with a radius of 30 cm (12 inches) around the nose and mouth. • Barriers must be set up in a manner that does not create a hazard. For example, do not block exits or emergency travel paths. Do not block or interfere with air supply vents, sprinkler systems or other life safety systems.

Ventilation	• If possible, for mechanically ventilated workplaces:
	  - Have the HVAC system inspected/evaluated to ensure it is properly maintained and operating as designed.
	  - Reduce air recirculation and increase the outdoor air intake as much as possible while maintaining comfortable indoor temperature and humidity.
	  - Do not turn off the ventilation system while the building is occupied. Outside working hours, turn the system down and not off completely.
	
	• For workplaces without mechanical ventilation:
	  - If possible, open windows and doors to promote air circulation.
	  - Consider high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filtered cleaning devices.
	
	• For more information on ventilation see COVID-19: Guidance on indoor ventilation during the pandemic .
	
	• If portable fans are used, ensure they do not blow air directly from one person's breathing zone to other occupants of a room.

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Administrative controls	
Employer Sick Policy	• Establish a clear policy outlining expectations for employees to not come to work, or leave work as soon as possible, if feeling unwell.

Distancing	• Physical distancing of at least 2 metres / 6 feet **MUST** be maintained as much as possible.
	• Restrict elevator capacity to the maximum number of riders that allows 2 metre /6 feet distancing.
	• Physical changes that may be needed to ensure adequate physical distancing:
	  - Remove or reconfigure chairs, furniture, and workstations so 2 metre / 6 feet distance can be maintained.
	  - Remove or otherwise take out of service chairs in waiting areas, meeting rooms, lunchrooms so 2 metre / 6 feet distance can be maintained.
	  - Post maximum occupancy for each room
	• Consider staggered lunch and break times to reduce the number of employees gathering.

Masks	• Consider making non-medical masks mandatory in common areas (ex: corridors, lobbies, washrooms, lunch/break rooms, meeting rooms), in areas where there is interaction with the public, or in any other circumstances where it may not be possible to achieve 2 metres / 6 feet distancing. • A non-medical mask is **highly recommended** in other areas to further reduce the risk of exposure due to unplanned or unexpected close contact with others at the workplace.

Signage	• Reminders to:
	  - Wear a non-medical mask.
	  - Not enter a workplace if symptomatic.
	  - Limit close contact interactions with co-workers.
	  - Practice good hand and respiratory hygiene.
	• Clearly label occupancy limits for rooms
	• Examples of signage available on the Nova Scotia Coronavirus (COVID-19) website.

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Control movement	• Direct traffic flow with the use of signage, floor decals, temporary barriers or other means. Ensure emergency exits are not blocked. • Establish separate entrances and exits, particularly in busy areas. • If possible, stagger employee start and end times to minimize the number of people arriving and leaving at the same time.
Cleaning	• Increase frequency of cleaning and disinfection, particularly with high traffic areas, high contact surfaces and washrooms. • Provide disposable cleaning wipes or other alternatives to allow employees to clean commonly used surfaces themselves. • Use cleaning products from Health Canada's list of hard-surface disinfectants shown to work against COVID-19. • Keep hand sanitizer dispensers readily available and in plain view with signs indicating to use upon entry.
Contact Tracing	• Use a daily sign in sheet (legible) or similar tracking method for employees and visitors to allow contact tracing in the event of an exposure. • Include name, contact information, and time/duration on site. • Develop an emergency evening and weekend call-out list. Assign organizational leads who can produce the above information for Public Health when requested.

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Personal Protective Equipment such as face shields, gloves and respirators would not typically be an applicable control measure in an office environment. Note that a non-medical mask is not considered PPE, as it is intended primarily to protect others, not yourself.

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Communicate and evaluate

Once the "Workplace COVID-19 Prevention Plan" has been completed, it must be communicated to all affected employees. They must be informed of the steps being taken to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 exposure in the workplace, as well as any specific steps they must take as part of the plan.

The plan should also be re-evaluated on a regular basis to ensure it is still adequately addressing the risk of COVID-19 exposure in the workplace. It should also be revisited any time there are changes to the COVID-19 Public Health Order to ensure it still meets the requirements detailed in the Order.

Questions

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References

American Industrial Hygiene Association [AIHA] – Reopening Guidance for General Office Settings

Government of Alberta – COVID-19 Information Guidance for Office Buildings

Worksafe BC – COVID-19 Safety Plan Template

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