



Omicron and the Rapid Changes to Government Public Safety Measures

OMICRON COVID-19 SURGE REMINDERS

As Canadian provincial governments begin to quickly enact changes to COVID-19 safety measures, amid the Omicron COVID-19 surge, we would like to remind our members and their Occupational Health and Safety committees that now is not the time to allow for “Coronavirus Burnout” and “Pandemic Fatigue” to allow COVID-19 protections in the workplace to fall short of their intended purpose – to protect all of us and our families.

Governments may drop some public safety measures, but that does not mean our workplaces have become free of hazards related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. We must maintain vigilance in keeping our workplaces and members safe and healthy!

In a huge surge, the first six weeks of 2022 have seen more than three times the amount of our members testing positive for COVID-19 than in all of 2020 and 2021! More in six weeks than in 23 months combined!

WE ARE IN ANOMICRON SURGE

Though the Omicron variant appears to be much less deadly than its predecessors, it is much more infectious and transmissible than all previous strains of SARS-CoV-2. We have to be vigilant in the ongoing protection that we have fought for throughout the pandemic. Workers are not immune to infection, regardless of vaccine status or the changing of public health measures.

There will be many potential challenges to overcome in our workplaces, as some employers will undoubtedly relax their own COVID-19 workplace protections leaving workers to ‘fend for themselves’ ... again.

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.
Everything else is secondary.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

At every workplace, regardless of changing public health measures, employers still have a legal responsibility to maintain the health and safety of employees, pandemic or not, and as a worker, you still have the same workplace rights that you have always had, including:

- the right to know about hazards,
- the right to participate in workplace safety, and
- the right to refuse unsafe work if you believe you are being endangered.

PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

Remembering that we are guided by the **precautionary principle** which leads us to emphasize the taking of precautions whenever dealing with an uncontrolled or unknown hazard. Decisions must be made with worker protection in mind, first and foremost. If you're unsure about what needs to be done in a certain situation, always err on the side of personal caution and safety.

As a member of the workplace's occupational health and safety committee, you have a legal obligation to partake in workplace inspections and, in most jurisdictions, to be notified or participate in workplace work refusal investigations, as well as being consulted with respect to workplace health-and-safety-related air quality testing. During this time of adjustment to changing public health measures amidst a pandemic that has not ended, JH&SC members will be as important as they ever were!

REMEMBER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC BASICS

1. The employers must have a return to work plan which includes protocols and procedures implemented in your workplace. These protocols have been put in place to protect you. Now is not the time for employers to change the rules. We are not in the clear just yet. Despite changing public health measures, the workplace still has to be healthy and safe. **You should continue to FEEL SAFE in your workplace.**
2. Everyone should understand their individual and collective role in their return to work process.
3. Workers must receive information and instruction about the workplace's infection control plan's changes, if any.
4. Employers must provide timely communications related to the workplace COVID-19 response.
5. Employers must consult with and inform workplace JH&SCs in workplace COVID-19 planning, changes, monitoring and actions.
6. Vaccination policies should be clear, fair, and developed with the help of the union.
7. Cleaning and sanitization protocols - the workplace should be as clean as it was when you returned to work after the initial opening.
8. Social distancing of 2 metres. Vaccinated or not, keep your distance.
9. Avoid high-touch surfaces through careful workplace planning.
10. The virus causing COVID-19 can spread via airborne pathways. It is extremely important that HVAC systems are maintained and inspected to provide the best protection available, through increased air exchanges and maximized filtration using the highest-rated protective filters.
11. PPE must be made available in all workplaces in situations where social distancing cannot be maintained or common surfaces are shared.
12. Proper fit testing of PPE is a major factor in its effectiveness and is a legal requirement.
13. Has the inventory of PPE been replenished and are future PPE reserves in place?
14. In settings where the virus is present or may be present, more protective N95 (or better) respirators must be made available.
15. Staffing shortages or changing government mandates are not excuses to put workers in danger.
16. Employee self-monitoring and self-assessment for COVID-19 symptoms must continue with an emphasis of staying home if symptoms are present.
17. Workplace mental health must be protected and supported.
18. Other aspects of health and safety in the workplace do not stop because of COVID-19. Workplace safety operating systems must continue alongside pandemic precautions. Inspections, investigations, consultations and assessments must continue.
19. Workplace COVID-19 infections must be documented and compensation claims established in occupationally exposed cases.
20. The basic workplace rights concerning knowing about hazards, participating in health and safety and refusing unsafe work have not changed. Use them!

STAY VIGILANT

We still have a long way to go. Don't let "Coronavirus Burnout" and changing government public protections lower your defenses! For more information, visit unifor.org/covid19.