

Restarting the Economy: What food and beverage processing workers need to know

June 8, 2020

Food and beverage processing workers across Canada have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than 1,400 confirmed COVID-19 cases thus far. Meat processing plants have been hit particularly hard, with a number of outbreaks occurring in Alberta and Quebec that have led to numerous deaths. While the government recently announced \$77.5 million to help the food and beverage processing industry access more personal protective equipment (PPE) and implement the necessary protocols to prevent further outbreaks, there continue to be concerns that employers have not responded adequately.

Governments must use the reopening of the economy as an opportunity to ensure that food and beverage processing plants are safe and that workers are protected from COVID-19 through rigorous health and safety protocols.

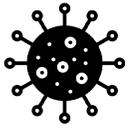
What food and beverage workers can expect when returning to work

While in most cases, food and beverage processing plants have been deemed essential and have remained open during provincial lockdowns, some workers who have been temporarily laid off may soon return to work. The challenges of the workplaces they will return to are considerable given that workers are required to perform fast-paced tasks with few pauses, often in close quarters with one another. Such working conditions significantly increase the likelihood of a COVID-19 outbreak.

Food and beverage workers should expect rigorous screening procedures to be in place to identify potential COVID-19 cases before they cause an outbreak, as well as robust return-to-work protocols that outline specific measures that must be taken by every employee to reduce the chances of spreading infection.

What food and beverage workers should expect from their employers

Employers must prioritize the health of their employees by putting in place the necessary health and safety protocols to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks, while responding to workers' and union concerns about ongoing operational challenges and issues.



Unifor expects employers to:

- Develop and implement robust return-to-work protocols that are aimed at mitigating COVID-19 hazards through workplace-specific practices and procedures, e.g. workplace screening, social-distancing guidelines, personal protective equipment (PPE) use, sanitization, etc.
- Provide workers with access to appropriate PPE, where needed.
- Provide the necessary training and information to workers so that they can follow the return-to-work protocols and health and safety guidelines.
- Appoint a health and safety supervisor who is tasked with ensuring that return-to-work protocols as well as public health directives and guidelines are being followed.

What food and beverage workers need from government

Governments across the country must ensure that measures are in place to prevent a repetition of outbreaks at food and beverage processing plants that have already seen thousands of workers fall ill from COVID-19.

Governments must:

- Develop specific public health directives and health and safety guidelines for food and beverage processing plants that are designed to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 outbreaks.
- Enforce public health directives and health and safety guidelines through proactive inspections of food and beverage processing plants.
- Penalize employers who violate public health directives and orders.
- Implement a rapid response complaint system that allows workers and their union representatives to report unsafe employer practices.
- Ensure that workers returning to their workplaces have adequate access to COVID-19 testing and that workers placed in quarantine are able to access a minimum of 14 days of paid sick leave.

Additional Resources

Unifor has launched a hub for member information about the pandemic at unifor.org/COVID19 and encourages members to check the site regularly for updates.

Subscribe to Unilink, the union's weekly national newsletter at unifor.org/subscribe and download the Unifor mobile app on your smartphone.