COVID-19 Worker Safety: What OHNs Need to Know

By Dianne Dyck

COVID-19 can cause mild to severe illness; most severe illness occurs in adults 65 years and older and people of any age with serious underlying medical problems. The complete clinical picture of COVID-19 is unknown. Reported illnesses have ranged from very mild (including some people with no reported symptoms) to severe, including death. While information so far suggests that most of the COVID-19 illnesses are mild, serious illness happens in 16% of people who were infected. However, there is no evidence that people with antibodies who have recovered from COVID-19, are protected from re-infection, or have long-term immunity.

Eighty per cent (80%) of deaths were among adults 65 years and older (CDC, 2020), with the highest percentage of severe outcomes occurring in people 85 years and older. People with serious underlying medical conditions like serious heart conditions, chronic lung disease, and diabetes, seem to be at higher risk of developing the severe COVID-19 illness.

The risk of exposure is high among:

- People in places where ongoing community spread of the virus has been reported.

- Healthcare workers caring for patients with COVID-19.

- Close contacts of persons with COVID-19.

- Travellers returning from affected international locations where community spread is occurring.

This article is designed to explain the impact of COVID-19 on worker safety, demonstrate how Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) control methods can support worker/customer safety in the workplace, and illustrate the OHN role in this time of uncertainty.

OH&S CONTROL METHODS

In the workplace, the OH&S control methods include the:

1. Engineering controls;

2. Administrative and work practice controls;

3. Use of personal protective equipment (PPE); and

4. Mitigation of consequences through emergency response planning.

These will be explained in terms of managing the opening of business in the aftermath of a nation-wide lockdown due to COVID-19.

A) Engineering controls are the first and most effective line of defense.

They include actions such as:

- Quarantine;

- Self-isolation;

- Online ordering;

- Self-check-out when purchasing items;
- Non-contact payment;
- Social distancing – customer control using queuing gates and limiting the number of customers per building; and/or
- Eliminating sick customers from the premises.

The intent is to eliminate the hazard or substitute the known hazard. In this case, the hazard, a virus, cannot be eliminated. But there are engineering controls that can be used to address the situation. Quarantine and self-isolation have proven successful. The online ordering of foods and products supports quarantine and self-isolation efforts. For businesses, providing self-check-out, non-contact payment, physical distancing, and keeping customers out of the site, are engineering efforts.

Before opening their business, the employer must undertake hazard management within their workplace. In this case, the hazard is known. With that in mind, assess the hazard's spread within their workplace. Think of how it could spread and what could be done to control that spread. Current research now indicates that 12-foot distancing is needed, not just 6 feet (Florida's Atlantic University, 2020).

The engineering controls should involve workplace and workflow redesign. This includes the elimination of unnecessary furniture, especially soft fabric chairs and couches, and other items that would elicit human contact. Workflow redesign plays out as online ordering; service booking and payment; redirection of customer traffic; customer control measures for shopping, checking out, and paying; and alternate delivery methods and times.

As part of the preparations, employers who have been closed for a period of time, must flush and test their water and ventilation systems. Although covid-19 is spread by droplets, and not airborne like SARS, increasing the outdoor air and humidity is a sound approach. Other engineering controls include:

- Wider corridors with one-way foot traffic;
- Touchless elevator controls;
- Touchless payment in food services;
- Use of video conferencing for meetings;
- Motion-activated taps, toilets and even, toilet stall doors;
- Motion-activated doors, light switches, and other controls.

Barriers are effective in controlling customer and worker flow - directing traffic and blocking divergent paths, forces customer movement. For shoppers, the use of plexiglass barriers between check-out stalls is an engineering control. Likewise, the use of plexiglass barriers between bathroom sinks. For office workers, high-walled cubicles/plexiglass barriers are a must.

Enclosures are recommended. For example, plexiglass enclosures are effective in controlling droplet spread and can be easily installed, cleaned, and disinfected. The use of plastic covers over ATMs, payment machines, and other information-gathering devices, can control the virus spread provided those covers are regularly cleaned and disinfected.

B. Administrative controls are the second line of defense.

COVID-19 Policy

Employers must develop a COVID-19 Policy that explains its purpose scope, and elements. It should include a 14-day job-protected leave for self-isolation due to COVID-19, along with other related measures such as work redesign. Work redesign can involve an initial evaluation of the current work structure and processes:

- What processes involve people-contact?

- How can the people-contact be eliminated/reduced?

- How can the practice of multiple-user workstations and open workspaces be made safe?

- Can non-contact ordering and payment methods be implemented?

- Can the use of shared items be eliminated?

To facilitate this process, refer to this sample policy:

https://resources.workable.com/coronavirus-covid-19-company-policy#

Staff Scheduling

The use of rotating shifts or alternating shifts can minimize the number of workers/students/ customers present at any one time. Contact among workers/students, clients, and customers can be eliminated through the use of virtual communication and meetings. Telework and remote participation by workers/students is encouraged. This is especially important for working parents in areas where schools will remain closed and summer-activity programs for children will be limited.

Safe Work and Operating Procedures (SWOPs)

SWOPs are administrative controls deal with:

1. Cleaning

- Wear disposable gloves to clean and disinfect work surfaces. Observe the prescribed disposal practices.

- Clean work surfaces using soap and water, and then, use a disinfectant. *Reminder: Cleaning and disinfecting are different*

- Practice routine cleaning of frequently touched surfaces such as tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, sinks, etc. More frequent cleaning and disinfection may be required based on level of use. Surfaces and objects in public places, such as shopping carts and point-of-sale keypads, should be cleaned and disinfected before each use.

2. Disinfecting

- Use and follow the instructions on the label of recommended disinfectants to ensure the safe and effective use of the product. Ensure the product is not past its expiration date.

    - Bleach solutions will be effective for disinfection up to 24 hours.

- Alcohol solutions with at least 70% alcohol may also be used.
- Many products recommend keeping the surface wet for at least one minute (refer to the product label for instructions).
- Precautions such as wearing gloves and good ventilation during use of the product, are required.

3. Soft Surfaces

For soft surfaces such as carpets, rugs, drapes, blinds, and upholstered furniture, clean the surface using soap and water or with cleaners appropriate for use on those surfaces. Launder items (if possible) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Disinfect with a household disinfectant.

4. Laundry (clothing, towels, linens, and other items)

Launder items according to the manufacturer's instructions. Use the warmest appropriate water setting and completely dry the items completely. It is important for workers to wear disposable gloves when handling dirty laundry from a sick person. Avoid shaking dirty laundry. Also, remember to clean and disinfect clothes hampers. When done, workers must remove their gloves and immediately wash their hands.

5. Electronics (tablets, touch screens, keyboards, remote controls, point of sale keypads, and ATM machines)

Electronics must be cleaned and disinfected in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. In the absence of such information, alcohol-based wipes or sprays containing at least 70% alcohol, can be used. Thoroughly dry the surface.

6. Outdoor Areas (worker lunch areas, playgrounds in schools and parks)

Outdoor areas require normal routine cleaning, especially the high-touch areas, but not disinfection. According to the CDC (2020), it is not an efficient use of supplies or proven to reduce the risk of COVID-19.

7. Post social distancing and handwashing posters and reminders.

Fitness to Work

As part of pre-screening for daily access to the workplace, the employee's temperature and possible symptoms should be assessed. Ideally, temperature checks should happen before the individual even enters the facility. If the employee has a normal temperature and is symptom-free, they should be encouraged to self-monitor under the supervision of their employer's occupational health program.

C. Use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

Available Safe Work Supplies

Have the recommended masks, gloves, handwashing stations, hand sanitizer, cleanser and wipes, disinfectants, and gowns/aprons, hats, face shields (if needed), available.

Worker Education

Worker education is a critical control measure. It should include general education on COVID-19, its symptoms, and what to do if they think they are infected. Explain the company's COVID-19 policy and the related practices. Train workers on the use of PPE; what PPE is necessary; how to properly put it on, use, and take off; and how to properly dispose of PPE. Ensure workers are trained on the hazards of the cleaning/disinfectant chemicals used in the workplace, and that they observe the company's standards on bloodborne pathogens and the proper disposal of contaminated wastes.

Educate all, on the parameters of social distancing, proper handwashing techniques, not touching the face or eyes, sneezing into the elbow, and the proper disposal of contaminated tissues. Explain how to routinely perform workplace cleaning. Discourage the sharing of tools and equipment.

Elevator use must be addressed - limit to 2-3 people per elevator depending on the size of the elevator. Encourage workers to select the desired floor with a covered hand, avoid touching their face, and cleanse their hands upon exiting the elevator.

Cafes and food courts are a risk. Encourage workers to avoid gathering in public areas, sharing food stuffs, and/or eating from open containers of candy, nuts, crackers, etc. This risk can be managed by using utensils versus fingers to eat, by using a napkin to use condiment dispensers (salt, pepper, ketchup, etc.), and by using hand sanitizer pre- and post drinking and eating. Social distancing and/or opting for take-out, drive-through, or delivery food services, are the best options.

Public transportation is for many, their only option for getting to and from work. Encourage them to wear a mask and gloves, maintain as much distance as possible between patrons, avoid touching one's face, and sanitize one's hands upon exiting. With carpooling, the recommendation is to limit the occupancy to two people – one driving and one in the backseat.

D. Mitigation of consequences through emergency response planning

Emergency Response Plan (ERP)

The employer must have a plan for dealing with worker sickness at work, or a belligerent customer, or a chemical exposure, and stay-at-home measures. This ERP must include when to send someone home from work due to sickness and how to deal with a worker who becomes sick while at work. For example, the employee should be separated from other employees, customers, and visitors, and immediately sent home. Follow CDC guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting areas the sick employee visited. Initiate contact-tracing measures. Encourage the sick worker to stay home until well or tests negative for COVID -19.

Mitigation Efforts

Many organizations have existing mitigation efforts - Occupational Health & Safety Program, Disability Management Program, Workers' Compensation Board support, disability insurance plans, and RTW planning and placement. These efforts need to be adapted to the unfolding COVID-19 management – the nature of the disease, anticipated aftermath, worker needs, organizational needs, and the unfolding legislative requirements.

Worker Support Services

Educate workers on the company's efforts to minimize their COVID-19 health risk and to optimize their health (Employee Assistance Program, employee group health benefits, etc.). Provide education on exactly *when* workers should stay home. Recognize that social isolation brings with it many issues: loneliness, depression, anger, and family violence and abuse. Advertise the company's available resources along with the contact details. Also, be cognizant of first-responder reaction to their exposure to so many sick and dying people. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a reality, as is suicide. Ensure that supportive measures in place.

YOUR ROLE AS AN OHN

As an OHN, you are educated, qualified and experienced to support and guide your employer and the workplace. In terms of COVID-19 and business re-opening, your role is to:

- Explain to the employer the value of engineering controls. Assist with the planning and implementation of the selected engineering controls and promote the evaluation of their effectiveness. Recommend changes when warranted.
- Explain to the employer the value of administrative controls. Assist with the planning and implementation of the selected administrative controls and promote the evaluation of their effectiveness. Conduct COVID-19 health education. Support the company's ERP response. Undertake the mitigation efforts. Oversee the employee support services. Evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts and recommend changes if needed.
- Explain to the employer the value of the PPE measures. Make sure that the right PPE is available and being effectively used. Educate workers on PPE use, cleansing, and disposal. Monitor the effectiveness of PPE use. As well, teach social distancing (6-12 ft) and its value. Monitor the effectiveness of social distancing.
- Most of all, be a role model - walk your talk. Practice a positive lifestyle. Take care of yourself and remain current on the changing research on COVID-19 and the recommended control measures. This means doing your homework - review:

    - Back to Work Safely, https://www.backtoworksafely.org/

    - CDC Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html

Conclusion

Risk management and loss reduction are particularly important to an organization. Having an OHN available to support the employer to be duly diligent in addressing the health and safety risks associated with COVID-19, can save employers a considerable amount of money and position them to retain their human capital. It also helps the employer to meet the applicable Occupational Health & Safety General Duty Clause: *To provide a safe and health workplace*.[1]

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[1] The General Duty Clause is stated in every provincial OH&S Act, as well as in Canada Labour Code II.

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