



Respiratory viruses and the workplace

Several different respiratory viruses can make people sick in the workplace. These include viruses that circulate in the population regularly, such as seasonal influenza, and new or emerging respiratory viruses. Of these, new viruses are generally only a public health concern if they can make people very sick. For example, new strains of the coronavirus family – some of which cause nothing more than the common cold – also include SARS-CoV, which led to the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, and COVID-19, responsible for the January 2020 outbreak in Wuhan, China.

Coronavirus

A pneumonia outbreak, now known to be caused by a new coronavirus, was identified in Wuhan, China on December 31, 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the virus a public health emergency.

New Brunswick's public health officials are carefully monitoring the situation in Canada and around the world, and are ready to respond should there be any cases in New Brunswick.

Outbreaks of new respiratory viruses can happen in any season. Most of the time, these start in other parts of the world – often, from animal viruses that have mutated first so that they can infect people, and then further mutate to spread from person to person. The new viruses spread across regions and internationally, when infected individuals travel.

Respiratory viruses can spread either directly or indirectly. Direct infection can happen if someone coughs, sneezes on you, or you shake hands with someone who is sick and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth. Indirect infection can happen from contaminated surfaces, tissues, cloth or paper.

Health officials are:

- working closely with federal, provincial and territorial partners to share information and assess potential health risks
- ensuring our health system is ready to respond effectively, if needed
- ensuring front-line health professionals have information about the virus so they can:
 - > take recommended actions
 - > promptly report suspected cases to public health officials

More Information on the Coronavirus

Centers of Disease Control and Prevention – Coronavirus
Public Health – Coronavirus
Public Health – Coronavirus infographic
Health Canada – Coronavirus
Health Canada – Coronavirus update

More information on new and emerging respiratory viruses and pandemic planning

Public Health – Respiratory diseases
Health Canada – Diseases and conditions
NB Pandemic Influenza Plan
Canadian Chamber of Commerce – Pandemic Preparedness

Workplace requirements

New Brunswick's *Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act* includes a provision that can apply when a respiratory virus is present in the workplace. Some of these are included below.

General duty

Employers, supervisor and employees have general responsibilities under the *OHS Act*.

Employers

Employers must take every reasonable precaution to ensure the health and safety of their employees.

Supervisors

Supervisors must take every reasonable precaution to ensure the health and safety of the employees who work under their supervision and direction.

Employees

Employees must conduct themselves to ensure their own health and safety and that of others at, in or near their employment.

Personal care best practices

- Good hand hygiene
- Social distancing
- Stay home if you feel sick

Workplace hygiene

Good workplace hygiene practices can also be important in controlling the spread of respiratory viruses in the workplace.

- Clean surfaces that are frequently touched with hands often.
- Clean shared workstations and equipment.
- If possible, discourage workers from sharing phones, desks, offices or other work tools and equipment.

In an Outbreak

Travel advisories may affect planned travel for work purposes. Employers, supervisors and workers should check and follow all advice provided by Public Health and Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.