

COVID-19

Workplace Outbreak Management Guidance

As COVID-19 is a sustained human viral infection and global pandemic, there will be cases in workers and workplaces where infection may have occurred in the workplace. Notification of a case or cases associated with a workplace will prompt initial investigation by Lambton Public Health (LPH) to determine if an outbreak exists, and to implement communicable disease control measures.

The goal of outbreak management is to identify the source of illness, control the outbreak, and limit secondary transmission. This guidance has been developed to support employers of non-healthcare workplaces to understand when LPH will declare an outbreak in a workplace, roles and responsibilities during a workplace outbreak, and measures that employers must take in the event one occurs in their workplace.

The information within this document is current at the time of its revision (June 9, 2021) and is subject to change based on updated regional, provincial or federal guidance. Every attempt will be made to ensure this guidance is revised when new information is received or modified.

Outbreak Definition

An outbreak in a workplace exists when:

- Two or more laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases with an epidemiological link in the workplace (e.g., same work area, same shift) within a 14-day period where both cases could have reasonably* acquired their infection in the workplace.

*Examples of reasonably having acquired infection in workplace include:

- No obvious source of infection outside of the workplace; OR
- Known exposure in the workplace.

Outbreak Identification

- Potential outbreaks may be identified by LPH through various means, such as:
 - Identification of a case or cases associated with a workplace
 - Complaints of illness at a workplace from employees



- Request for assistance from an employer
- Information received through the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) such as a referral from a workplace complainant
- Notification through other ministries, provincial, or federal partners

Role of Lambton Public Health (LPH):

- Receive and investigate reports of cases and contacts of COVID-19 in accordance with the [Public Health Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario](#) and the [Health Protection and Promotion Act \(HPPA\)](#).
- Investigate clusters of cases associated with common workplace locations.
- Determine if an outbreak exists, provide guidance and recommendations to the workplace on outbreak measures, and determine when the outbreak is over.
- Issuance of orders by the medical officer of health or their designate under the HPPA, if necessary
- Make recommendations on and facilitate outbreak testing, and provide an investigation or outbreak number to coordinate testing.
- Refer and/or communicate with relevant stakeholders and ministries, as necessary.
- May provide information to employers regarding their duty to report occupational illness to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) if they have not been notified.
- May share recommendations/orders issued to the employer with MLTSD for their awareness and provide a referral to MLTSD if concerns of issues under the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA).
- Conduct an on-site investigation as part of the outbreak investigation, where necessary.

Role of Employer:

- General duty under the OHSA to take all precautions reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker.
- Implement prevention measures found in guidance issued by the Ontario government and any specific prevention measures recommended by public health agencies.
- Comply with OHSA and other applicable legislation and regulations, and any orders issued by MLTSD.
- Provide notices of an occupational illness to the MLTSD under ss 52(2) of the OHSA.
- Cooperate with public health investigations and MLTSD OHSA inspectors.
- Comply with recommendations and/or orders issued by LPH and OHSA inspectors.
- It is recommended to maintain accurate shift records and up-to-date contact information for employees.
- Communicate with staff and other stakeholders, as needed, when there is an outbreak.

Steps Taken in a Workplace Outbreak:

Employer/Workplace Measures:

Employee Support:

- Support employees who need to be absent from work due to illness or being a close contact of a confirmed case of COVID-19.
- Maintain confidentiality of employees' personal health information.

Contact Tracing:

- Work with LPH to develop a list of employees, and where applicable, clients/customers/visitors, at risk of exposure.
- Provide LPH with accurate shift records and up-to-date contact information for employees when requested. This contact information should be part of your workplace safety plan which should include:
 - Names and contact information of all participants at in-person meetings or events where close contact for prolonged periods of at least 15 minutes occurs. In addition, lists should include contact information for employees working in close proximity to each other.

Infection Prevention:

- Follow public health guidance for implementing infection prevention and control measures to control and limit further transmission in the workplace. This may include implementing certain workplace restrictions and temporary closures; implementing additional [cleaning and disinfecting measures](#).

Mandatory Reporting:

- You must let workers know if they may have been exposed in the workplace.
- You should give all workers information about the date and time of the potential exposure and where it took place. Don't give out any information that might identify the infectious person.
- You do not need to undertake contact tracing activities unless asked to do so by LPH.
- This duty to inform your workers is independent of any public health direction, although it may be fulfilled by steps taken under public health direction as part of contact tracing.
- If you are advised that one of your workers has tested positive for COVID-19 due to exposure at the workplace, or that a claim has been filed with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), you must give notice in writing within four days to the following:
 - [Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development](#)
 - Workplace joint health and safety committee or a health and safety representative
 - Worker trade union (if applicable)

- Report any occupationally acquired illnesses to the [WSIB](#) within three days of receiving notification of the illness.

For more information, please refer to:

- [Occupational Health and Safety Act](#)
- [COVID-19 and Ontario Human Rights Code](#)

Lambton Public Health's Involvement:

The level of public health's involvement in a workplace outbreak will depend on a number of factors, such as: the epidemiology of the outbreak, number of cases and size of the workplace, IPAC practices in the workplace, evidence of ongoing transmission, transmission risk in the workplace and into the community, and resources of the workplace/employer to address the outbreak. In a workplace outbreak, LPH will conduct:

Case Management:

- Investigate and confirm if a workplace outbreak exists.
- Investigate and manage all cases of COVID-19 according to the [Public Health Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario](#). LPH will:
 - Isolate individuals testing positive. Consent is obtained from the employee before disclosing personal health information with the employer.
 - Identify and isolate close contacts of the confirmed case.
 - Prioritize testing of any symptomatic individuals associated with the workplace, and any symptomatic close contacts of individuals associated with the workplace. Testing is also recommended for all asymptomatic individuals who are close contacts of confirmed cases associated with the workplace outbreak area (or as directed by the LPH) once an outbreak is declared.

Contact Tracing:

- Identify a broader set of contacts than those identified through individual level case management which could include:
 - Assessing potential exposures in the workplace related to shared work area/break areas/common areas/washroom facilities/staffing schedules with the known case(s) in their period of communicability.
 - Assessing potential exposures to clients/customers/visitors in the workplace from known case(s) in their period of communicability.
 - Investigating other potential sources of infection in the workplace that were not identified during individual case follow-up.
 - Reassessing risk of exposure of potential contacts in the workplace, defining an 'outbreak area' in the workplace and identifying those at risk. A broad and inclusive approach should be applied when identifying an outbreak area and may include the entire workplace.

- Working with the employer to develop a list of employees, and where applicable, clients/customers/visitors, at risk of exposure.
- Assessing context of workplace and whether others outside of the workplace are at risk due to shared building/common spaces with the workplace (e.g., shared elevators, washrooms)

Infection Prevention:

- Investigate other potential sources of infection in the workplace that were not identified during individual case follow-up.
 - Assess context of workplace and whether others outside of the workplace are at risk due to shared building/common spaces with the workplace (e.g., shared elevators, washrooms).
 - Provide public health advice that may include additional [cleaning and disinfecting measures](#) to reduce the risk of spread in the setting.
 - Assess existing prevention and control measures including staff training on and adherence to those measures.
 - Make recommendations on the implementation of additional measures as appropriate to reduce the risk of transmission associated with activities inside and outside of the workplace (e.g., limiting carpooling).
- Determine when the outbreak is declared over.

Resources

Government of Ontario

- [Ontario Guidance: Workplace Outbreaks](#)
- [Ontario Resources to Prevent COVID-19 in the Workplace](#)

Public Health Agency of Canada

- [Measures to Reduce COVID-19 In Your Community](#)
- [Risk Informed Decision-Making Guidelines for Workplaces and Businesses](#)
- [How Businesses and Employees Can Stay Safe While Open During COVID-19](#)

References:

1. Ministry of Health. COVID-19 Guidance: Workplace Outbreak. Version 1, June 11,2020. Retrieved from http://health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/2019_workplace_outbreak_guidance.pdf
2. Hamilton Public Health. Workplace Guidance. Retrieved from <https://www.hamilton.ca/sites/default/files/media/browser/2020-07-31/covid19-workplace-outbreak-guidelines.pdf>
3. Toronto Public Health. COVID-19 Guidance: Workplaces, Employers and Businesses. Retrieved from <https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-reopening-recovery-rebuild/covid-19-reopening-guidelines-for-businesses-organizations/covid-19-guidance-employers-workplaces-businesses/>