FACT SHEET

UNIFOR

Occupational Health and Safety

Wuhan novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)

On December 31, 2019, Chinese health authorities identified a new (or novel) coronavirus (referred to as 2019-nCoV) through a series of reported cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, China. We all have a responsibility to reduce risks of exposure to and transmission of the virus. As workers, take precautions to reduce exposure. Employers should create preventions plans in consultation with relevant health and safety committees and worker representatives.

Coronaviruses

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses. They can cause diseases ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

Some human coronaviruses spread easily between people, while others do not.

Though it has been determined that the virus can spread from person to person, how exactly the virus is transmitted remains unclear.

The American Center for Disease Control and Prevention identifies four main types of CoV in which infections are quite common, usually leading to common cold symptoms. However, there are the rare types of CoV such as SARS and MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) that can be far more serious and can lead to pneumonia, respiratory failure, kidney failure, or even death.

Pandemics and workplace laws

Due diligence is commonly addressed in health and safety legislation under the "general duty clause," which places a duty on employers to take all reasonable precautions to prevent injuries or accidents in the workplace. The general duty clause also applies to all situations that are not addressed elsewhere in the occupational health and safety legislation.

How to protect yourself

To reduce exposure to and transmission of a range of illnesses, including coronaviruses, you should follow usual health precautions such as:

- Washing your hands often
- Avoiding contact with people who are sick
- Practicing proper cough and sneeze etiquette

If you are travelling to an area known to have cases of coronavirus, be sure to avoid:

- High-risk areas such as farms, live animal markets and areas where animals may be slaughtered
- Contact with animals (alive or dead), including pigs, chickens, ducks and wild birds
- Surfaces with animal droppings or secretions on them

Occupational safety

Workers in some sectors (for example, health care and transportation) have a greater likelihood of exposure to viruses and other disease-causing agents. Employers have a general duty to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances to protect workers from hazards in their workplaces. Employers in these sectors should already have effective plans in place for regular day-to-day interactions.

When new viruses are identified, employers, in consultation with their health and safety committees or worker representatives, should follow an appropriate hazard-assessment methodology that looks at the virus and considers if existing controls are appropriate. The goal of a prevention plan must be to eliminate exposure to the infectious virus as much as possible. The selection of controls should be guided by a hierarchy of controls and include both engineering and administrative controls.

Engineering controls

- Use isolation wards and self-contained areas and negative pressure rooms to reduce exposure when cases are suspected
- Ensure proper ventilation with high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filtration units
- Make plans to alter the physical space of workplaces to prevent the spread of viruses and influenza-like illness
- Establish separate entrances and exits as well as triage areas in health care workplaces for those with suspected CoV, influenza, or related symptoms

Administrative controls

- Develop an exposure control plan before an outbreak occurs
- Stock and manage the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Adjust staffing levels to accommodate high rates of sick leave
- Educate workers, patients and visitors on viruses and influenza, including the steps to take to mitigate exposure
- Group infected patients in health care settings and limit worker exposure to infected patients
- Combine tasks to limit the number of workers entering areas with infected patients
- Implement effective environmental, housekeeping and laundry protocols (where applicable) to reduce the spread of viruses and influenza
- Provide access to effective hygiene and hand-washing facilities

Personal protective equipment

- Provide fit-tested N95 respirators or more protective NIOSH-certified respirators for all workers
- Wear gloves, face shields, and gowns

- Communicate policies and procedures to ensure N95 respirators are fit-tested annually or if facial features change

The use of surgical-type masks does not provide adequate protection from viral exposure. Minimal protection is usually granted by a N95 respirator. All workers who are fit-tested with N95 respirators must carry identification indicating the type and size of their respirator. Additionally, workers need to receive training on all aspects of PPE (putting on, wearing, removal, disposal, etc.).

What we learned from SARS – take precautions

In the aftermath of the SARS outbreak, Ontario established a commission to look at the introduction and spread of SARS. In its final report, Commissioner Justice Archie Campbell wrote that "we cannot wait for scientific certainty before we take reasonable steps to reduce risk".

Campbell's report identified the precautionary principle as an approach for protecting workers in circumstances of scientific uncertainty. This reflects the need to take prudent action in the face of potentially serious viruses without having to wait for complete scientific proof that a course of action is necessary.

Sources: WHO, Ontario Government, CUPE, PSAC, ONA

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