



Benefits *Bulletin*

Returning Work – Safe Workplace

After months of disrupted work schedules with businesses either being shut down completely, working with just a skeleton staff, or staff working remotely, many businesses are preparing to welcome their staff and customers back to the workplace. There is an obligation for employers to ensure they provide a safe work environment. In our COVID-19 world, this means taking extra precautions.

Working with various stakeholders such as the joint health and safety committee, union leaders, and supervisors, develop a safety plan as it relates to COVID-19 and communicate it in advance of a return to work to everyone: workers, contractors, suppliers, clients, etc.

The safety plan should address:

- PPE required and where to find supplies
- Any screening required prior to entry/re-entry of worksite
- Enhanced cleaning measures being taken
- New protocols to allow for physical distancing
- Any worksite modifications made to allow physical distancing (ex. plexiglass barriers)
- Resources for employees to discuss return to work issues
- Signage required promoting hygiene (ex. proper handwashing), physical distancing, etiquette regarding sneezing/coughing, etc.
- Support available to workers who may need to self-isolate and/or fall ill

Your local public health authority will have resources to assist you in developing this plan.

Ontario has developed sector-specific guidelines and tip sheets that may be helpful:

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/resources-prevent-covid-19-workplace>.

A safe work environment does not just relate to the physical environment – mental health must also be considered. Some workers may be anxious to come back to work while others may be anxious about returning. A gradual reopening of the economy may mean that workers have overlapping responsibilities (ex. child care and work) and may be stressed about how they will manage both; others may be worried about increased contact with others and increasing their risk of illness. You can support workers and ease their stress by:

- Providing training for new protocols
- Reviewing the safety plan with team members
- Providing a refresher course on processes/safe workplace practices especially for those who are in safety-sensitive roles
- Encourage managers to check-in with staff more regularly
- Being flexible around scheduling
- Encouraging workers to reach out to an EAP
- Reminding workers to stay away if they have been in contact with an infected person or feel ill and ensure that they are supported in doing so

Returning to work does not mean returning to normal. Normal is a fluid concept and has been irrevocably changed by the coronavirus. There will be an effort required by all team members to find the new normal for your workplace and to make it safe for everyone. It may take some time and lots of patience, but having a plan and resources to execute that plan will ease the process.