

Updated: April 29

COVID-19 AND CUPE WORKERS IN COMMUNITY HEALTH: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

B.C.'s health care system continues to be on heightened alert to contain and slow the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). As the situation regarding COVID-19 evolves here in B.C., the Ministry of Health, Office of the Provincial Health Officer and the BC Centre for Disease Control are keeping CUPE and other health sector unions informed through regular briefings so that we can provide our members with the most accurate information possible.

Please see [current pandemic planning and preparedness guidelines](#) by the BC Centre for Disease Control.

Following are frequently asked questions and answers for health care workers in B.C.

WHAT PERSONAL PROTECTIVE MEASURES SHOULD I TAKE AS A HEALTH CARE WORKER?

- **Follow the same advice that public health officials recommend for the cold and flu season:**
 - wash your hands often with soap and water, and avoid touching your face
 - cover your mouth and nose with your elbow or shoulder when coughing or sneezing
 - avoid others who are unwell
 - stay home when you are sick. Call 8-1-1, your primary care provider, or the public health office
 - **NEW:** CUPE has released [updated guidelines](#) on cleaning versus disinfecting.

- **Masks and personal protective equipment**
 - Please note that safety glasses do not offer adequate protection from microbes. For CUPE members who are working with infected (or potentially infected people), we recommend the use of a fit-tested N95 mask and eye protection like a face shield. This includes front-line health care workers or those who are redeployed to jobs or roles with patient contact. Use surgical masks if N95s become unavailable due to supply constraints but resume use of N95s if and when possible.
 - We recognize the challenge associated with worldwide shortages of appropriate PPE. Where it is anticipated that logistical constraints may cause supplies of N95 disposable respirators to run out, prioritize allocation based on assessment of the extent of the potential exposure and risk.
 - Airborne precautions should be implemented for health care workers doing patient care that requires aerosol generating procedures (such as intubation, airway suction etc.), which require higher levels of protection.
 - For more information, see CUPE's [COVID-19 fact sheet](#) and this [Joint statement from Canada's unions: Safety is not negotiable for anyone - including health care workers.](#)
 - **NEW:** CUPE has released updated guidelines on [masks and respirators](#) and [proper use](#) of your PPE.

CANADA'S CHIEF PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER AND OTHERS ARE SAYING THAT WEARING A HOME-MADE FACIAL COVERING MIGHT HELP STOP THE SPREAD OF THE CORONAVIRUS. IS THIS TRUE? IF MY WORKPLACE IS RUNNING OUT OF PPE, SHOULD I CONSIDER MAKING MY OWN MASK?

- Health Canada has advised that wearing a facial covering/non-medical mask in the community has not been proven to protect the person wearing it and is not a substitute for physical distancing and hand washing. Wearing a homemade mask is an additional measure you may wish to take to help protect others around you, especially if you are experiencing symptoms. If you decide to wear a homemade mask, it should only be for short periods of time when physical distancing is not possible in public settings, such as when grocery shopping or using public transit.

- To be clear, homemade masks are not medical devices or PPE and should not be used as a substitute for surgical masks or N95 respirators. They are not effective in blocking virus particles that may be transmitted by coughing, sneezing, or certain medical procedures.
- [For more information, please visit the Health Canada website.](#)
- **Ensuring your safety**
 - All workers in British Columbia have the right to refuse unsafe work.
 - A worker has the right to refuse to carry out any work process or operate or cause to be operated any tool, appliance or equipment if the worker has reasonable cause to believe that to do so would create an undue hazard to the health and safety of any person, including the worker. (Occupational Health and Safety Regulation 3.12).
 - You must immediately report the circumstances of the unsafe condition to your supervisor or employer, who is obligated to immediately investigate the issue, and ensure that any unsafe condition is remedied without delay.
 - During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, a process has been established by HEABC employers to ensure issues related to right to refuse are dealt with expeditiously.
 - If you feel you are being asked to do work that is unsafe, report this immediately to your supervisor and contact your shop steward or CUPE Local. For health and safety concerns of a less urgent nature, the correct process is to notify your supervisor, the joint health and safety committee, and your CUPE local. Your joint health and safety committee is required by the Workers Compensation Act to investigate all health and safety concerns.
 - We understand that you are worried about going to work due to safety concerns. You as a member, as well as your CUPE local, has the right to have access to the employer's health and safety protocols and practices. In addition, you need assurance that, should such protocols and practices not be followed, there will be a mechanism or process in place to quickly address the relevant issues. Please keep in mind that, provided these protocols and practices are in place, the employer has the right to expect you to work as directed.
 - For more information, see CUPE's [Refusing Unsafe Work – COVID-19](#) bulletin and **(NEW)** CUPE National's [updated guidelines](#).

WHAT DO I DO IF I HAVE BEEN OR BELIEVE I HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO COVID-19?

- **Call 8-1-1, your primary care provider, or the public health office**
 - If you are instructed by a primary care provider to self-isolate, make sure you inform your employer, and you will be placed on paid general leave. This will not affect your other leave banks, including your sick bank.
 - [BC Centre for Disease Control guidelines on self-isolation](#)
 - If you are a casual employee, you will be placed on a general leave of absence and compensated for any accepted shifts that were canceled.
 - Employees are not required to get a sick note from a physician but are encouraged to obtain the name of the 8-1-1 nurse they speak to.
 - Contact your CUPE Local if you have concerns about how your time is being coded if you are self-isolated.
 - Health care worker testing sites are available. Contact your health authority for information on testing.
 - Link: [VCH/Providence Health Care](#)

WHAT SHOULD MY EMPLOYER DO IF A CASE OF COVID-19 IS CONFIRMED IN MY WORKPLACE?

Employers have an obligation to ensure workers are informed and equipped to work in settings where there's risk of exposure to COVID-19, and should provide timely, specific and clear direction to health care workers on the infection control protocols they will follow to avoid exposure to the virus.

PART OF MY WORK IS BASED OUT OF A LONG-TERM CARE FACILITY OR HOSPITAL. WHAT DOES THE PROVINCIAL HEALTH OFFICER'S ORDERS ON SINGLE SITE RESTRICTIONS MEAN FOR ME?

- On March 26, 2020, the Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, issued orders to limit staff movement between long-term care facilities, hospitals and other health care work sites.
- We believe that few CUPE members are impacted by this order. However, if you are a CUPE member who works, at least in part, at a long-term care facility, hospital, assisted living residence, provincial mental health facility, extended care centre or rehab centre in B.C., see the data collection order and review the following prepared Q & A:
 - **Will this affect me if I currently work at only one worksite?**
 - No, if you currently work at only one worksite, you will continue to work at that worksite and will not need to do anything different at this time.
 - **Will this affect where I work long term?**
 - This order and related orders will be in effect for as long as is necessary to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. We cannot predict how long that will be, but you should anticipate disruption to your regular schedule for some time.
 - **My job involves me visiting multiple sites to deliver specialized care. If I am limited to one worksite, patients will go without critical care, and their health will be compromised.**
 - CUPE understands the critical services of health science professionals, and the impact that such an order could have on patient care. CUPE has alerted the Medical Health Officers, who have the authority to exempt certain groups from being restricted from working at multiple sites, to take into consideration the implication of denying services to patients as a consequence of the order.
 - Anyone who is not covered by the exemptions must register to indicate their worksite preference. Exempted groups are:
 - * 1. Physicians
 - * 2. Resident Physicians
 - * 3. Nurse practitioners
 - * 4. Paramedics
 - * 5. Delivery persons
 - * 6. Trades people
 - * 7. Visitors
 - * 8. Any other class of person exempted by the Provincial Health Officer
 - **I need both the jobs I have at different sites to maintain my family's income.**
 - CUPE and other unions have been working to ensure that members do not experience loss of income as a result of the Provincial Health Officer's order. Employers are to make efforts to ensure that employees continue to work the same FTE they worked prior to the change, and all employees will be encouraged to maximize their hours.
 - **I'm a casual. Does this order apply to me?**
 - Yes. This order applies to everyone who works in health care.
 - **What happens to all my pre-booked shifts?**
 - Staff are anticipated to work all scheduled shifts, and the goal is to maintain at least the current maximum hours.

I AM PREGNANT. WHAT PRECAUTIONS SHOULD I TAKE?

The BCCDC and Ministry of Health have determined that pregnant women are not at greater risk of acquiring COVID-19, nor are they at greater risk of severe symptoms than comparable aged persons. If you are pregnant, we encourage you to consult with your primary care provider on whether you should remain in your current role, or be accommodated to

work in a low-risk setting or work from home. Supportive documentation from your primary care provider will be required to seek the approval of an accommodation from your manager/accommodations department.

I HAVE AN UNDERLYING HEALTH CONDITION AND AM AT RISK DURING THIS PANDEMIC. I DON'T THINK I SHOULD BE AT WORK.

- Employees who are at a higher risk for serious illness due to COVID-19 are eligible for a medical accommodation.
 - Your employer should
 - 1) Try to redeploy you to avoid direct patient care or otherwise minimize risk of exposure
 - 2) Arrange for you to work from home where possible

If neither of those is possible, you may be placed on sick leave.

- CUPE and the bargaining association is working with employers to streamline processes to allow for accommodations and appropriate leaves.

MY EMPLOYER SAYS THAT I AM A CRITICAL PUBLIC SERVICE WORKER [“essential”] AND I’M NOT SURE THAT I AM.

- The Public Health Officer has given health care and social services employers the right to determine whether or not staff members are essential to the delivery of services.
- CUPE members play a vital role in the providing of caring, professional, and excellent service to patients and clients. During a time of crisis in which the public requires access to these services, employers continue to deem our members critical.
- CUPE members may be redeployed under the employer’s redeployment policies during this time if they are not required in their usual unit, department, program, or location.
- Members who are redeployed should be qualified and trained to perform duties without putting workers at risk as a result of changes to work duties.
- In all circumstances, when you are at work, the employer is responsible for ensuring that your workplace is safe while providing these services.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS TO STAY AT HOME OR TAKE LEAVE FROM WORK?

Working in this sector, you are more than likely deemed a critical worker (“essential”). What this means is that you are expected to be at work, unless your manager approves that you work from home or take a leave (unpaid or otherwise). Extenuating circumstances, such as the need for dependent care (child or elder), must be supported by clear documentation.

MY EMPLOYER IS ASKING ME TO REPORT TO WORK EVEN THOUGH I THINK THAT I CAN WORK AT HOME. DOESN'T IT MAKE MORE SENSE FOR ME TO WORK AT HOME?

In some circumstances, our members may be able to perform their work from home if the employer has the ability to provide them proper equipment and appropriate access to their files or records. However, the employer has the right to make this determination.

NEW: HOW CAN I FIND OUT WHAT GOVERNMENT BENEFITS I’M ENTITLED TO DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Over the past few weeks, there have been regular announcements on both provincial and federal government benefits that individuals can access during the COVID-19 pandemic. To help members sort through the information, we have created a [brief overview](#) so you can find all of the information in one place. As updates to government benefits are constantly occurring, we encourage you to visit the websites referenced throughout the brief.

WITH SCHOOLS AND DAYCARES CLOSED, I HAVE NO CARE ARRANGEMENTS FOR MY DEPENDANT CHILD AND HAVE TO STAY HOME. WHAT DO I DO?

- At this time, childcare providers and schools that provide care and/or in-class instruction have been instructed to prioritize placements for those children whose parents are employed as ‘Tier 1’ essential service employees, a field that includes [front-line health care](#) as well as social services, law enforcement, first responders and emergency response.
- Since the conclusion of spring break, the Province has been partnering with health authorities to assist ‘Tier 1’ workers in accessing childcare on an urgent need basis. If you are someone in this position, please take the following steps:
- If your children are non-school aged*, complete the **Temporary Emergency Child Care for Essential Workers** form and submit it to your local Childcare Resource and Referral (CCRR) Centre. The Centre will work to match front-line health care workers with a childcare provider that has available space. Alternatively, you can call 1-888-338-6622 and select Option 4. (*City of Vancouver members should fill out the [Temporary Emergency Child Care for Essential Workers form](#). For assistance completing this form, call 3-1-1.)
 - For parents with school-aged children, contact your school district directly:
 - [Vancouver](#) (See above)
 - [Burnaby](#) (School District 41)
 - [Surrey](#) (School District 36)
 - [Richmond](#) (School District 38)
 - [Langley](#) (School District, no information available about childcare for essential workers to date)
 - [Delta](#) (School District 37, no information available about childcare for essential workers to date)
 - [North Van](#) (no information available on emergency childcare to date)
 - [West Van](#) (West Vancouver Schools)
 - [New West](#) (School District 40, look for the link to take the survey, which is where canvassing for childcare needs is taking place)
 - [Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Anmore/Belcarra](#) (School District 43, general info on COVID-19 but no specific info available about childcare to date)
 - [Maple Ridge & Pitt Meadows](#) (School District 42)
 - [Abbotsford](#) (School District 34, no information available about childcare for essential workers to date)
 - [Mission](#) (School District 75, no information available about childcare for essential workers to date)
 - [Victoria](#) (School District 61)
 - [Sooke](#) (School District 62)
 - [Saanich](#) (School District 63, no information available about childcare for essential workers to date)
 - [Port Alberni](#) (School District 70)
- Additional information on child care for essential workers can be found [here](#).
- The provincial government has announced the creation of a new COVID-19 leave provision in the Employment Standards Act to protect you if you require time off due to childcare or for another reason related to COVID-19. This amendment allows employees to take unpaid, job-protected leave related to COVID-19 if they’re unable to work for any of the following reasons:
 - They have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and are following the instructions of a medical health officer or the advice of a doctor or nurse.
 - They are in quarantine or self-isolation and are acting in accordance with an [order of the provincial health officer](#), an order made under the Quarantine Act (Canada), guidelines from the BC Centre for Disease Control or guidelines from the Public Health Agency of Canada.
 - Their employer has directed them not to work due to concern about their exposure to others.
 - They need to provide care to their minor child or a dependant adult who is their child or former foster child for a reason related to COVID-19, including a school, daycare or similar facility closure.
 - They are outside of B.C. and unable to return to work due to [travel or border restrictions](#).

- For your first 20 days of such leave, regular employees will continue to accrue their collective agreement benefits. For leaves of this type beyond 20 days, the Employment Standards Act will provide a continuation of accrual and retention of their extended health benefits, seniority, service time, and vacation (except for the accrual of vacation pay for CBA members).
- The federal government has announced the Emergency Response Benefit, which will cover people who have lost their job, people who are sick or quarantined, and parents who must stay home without pay to care for children. The benefit also covers workers who have no income due to the economic slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It will cover employees, contract workers, and self-employed workers to the tune of \$2,000 per month for the next four months, backdated to March 15, 2020. You can apply now. For details on eligibility and the application process, visit: [Canada Emergency Response Benefit Q&A](#).
- If for some reason you do not qualify or if your lack of access to childcare persists beyond 16 weeks, we encourage you to work with your CUPE Local to discuss a fair workplace accommodation that does not put you or the employer in a position of undue hardship (including financial hardship). This may include accessing vacation banks or a portion of paid general leave.

I LIVE WITH MY ELDERLY PARENTS, AND I'M CONCERNED ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF EXPOSING THEM TO COVID-19. CAN I TAKE SPECIAL LEAVE TO REDUCE MY RISK OF EXPOSURE AT WORK?

Special leave banks do not cover staying at home to reduce risk of exposure. With the approval of your manager, you may access overtime banks, vacation, and unpaid leave to stay home in this situation.

WHERE CAN I GET SUPPORT FOR SELF CARE?

Please make use of your extended health benefits and your employee assistance program (EAP) or employee family assistance program (EFAP). Pacific Blue Cross has created a [FAQ on COVID-19](#). They have responses to questions about disability coverage and how they are handling claims and benefits. If you have any questions or require additional support, please [contact your CUPE local](#).

I NEED TO CONTINUE WITH MY PHYSIOTHERAPY OR CHIROPRACTIC TREATMENT, BUT OUR EXTENDED BENEFITS PLAN DOESN'T COVER TELE-CONSULTATION.

- **Coverage rules have changed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- The HBT team is working closely with Pacific Blue Cross to ensure employees have access to Tele-Health and Virtual services to support ongoing care during COVID-19 social distancing initiatives.
- **Reimbursement for Tele-Physiotherapy and Tele-Chiropractic Treatment**
 - Reimbursement is available to **ALL** employees who receive benefits:
 - Tele-Physiotherapy and Tele-Chiropractic treatments are now available to ensure the continuance of care during COVID-19 social distancing requirements.
 - Reimbursement for these Tele-Health treatments will apply from March 24, 2020 until June 24, 2020.
- The COVID-19 social distancing requirement will be monitored on an ongoing basis.
 - Reimbursement will be provided for subsequent visits only and practitioners must work in alignment with PBC requirements as well as their Professional College guidelines
- For more information, please visit the [Pacific Blue Cross COVID-19 page](#).
- **Ongoing Tele-Health and Virtual Services available to employees for reimbursement**
 - Reimbursement is available to **ALL** employees who receive benefits:
 - Registered Counselling
 - Psychological Services
 - Naturopathic Services
 - Prescription Medication Home Delivery
 - These Tele-Health and Virtual Services will continue post-COVID-19
- **The following Digital Mental Health Therapy for COVID-19 anxiety is available to all employees**

- Available to ALL employees at no cost and at any time, visit [Starling Minds](#) for free mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **COVID-19 Resource App**
 - For a central resource for accessing personalized, trusted, evidence-based information about COVID-19, the following [COVID-19 BC Support App](#) is available to you in partnership with the BC Ministry of Health.
- **Psychological Services**
 - The BC Psychological Association is offering free support services for health care and other essential workers who are experiencing stress, anxiety, or uncertainty due to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic. [This service can supplement the services covered by the extended health benefits you are entitled to under your collective agreement. See the resource here.](#)

WHAT IF I HAVE TRAVELLED? WHEN DO I NEED TO SELF-ISOLATE?

- If you have returned from travel outside of Canada and are asymptomatic, contact your employer to determine if you must self-isolate before returning to work. Your employer will determine if you are a critical public servant (“essential to the delivery of patient care”), [as per the March 15 letter to health care workers from the Provincial Health Officer](#).
- If you are deemed “non-essential”, then you must self-isolate for a period of 14 days. Notify your employer and you will be placed on a paid general leave with no impact to your sick bank or other earned banks.
- If you are deemed “essential,” your supervisor or manager will provide you with precautions you should be taking while continuing to work at your facility or otherwise performing the critical work that you do.
- If you develop symptoms or believe you may have been exposed to COVID-19, contact your primary caregiver or 8-1-1. If you are instructed to self-isolate, contact your employer and you will be placed on paid general leave while in self-isolation and awaiting further direction from your primary care provider.
- *For more information, see the [Public Health Agency advice for Returning Travellers](#). For more advice on self isolation, see Section 7 of the [CUPE National COVID-19 guidelines](#).*

I AM A RETIRED/NON-PRACTICING HEALTH CARE WORKER. HOW DO I RE-REGISTER SO I CAN HELP?

We would like to thank you for your dedication to care. Please contact your professional association or regulatory college.

- [For physical therapists, see the college link here.](#)
- For social workers: If you are a registrant in good standing in the Full (RSW) or Clinical (RCSW) class who is not already providing support during the COVID-19 pandemic and would be able to assist with the health care system capacity in a paid position, please e-mail the College at office.coordinator@bccsw.ca. Please write “Emergency Social Worker for COVID-19” in the subject line and include your full name and registration number in the body of the e-mail. If you have forgotten your registration number, you can search it by clicking ‘Verify a Registrant’ on the College website www.bccsw.ca.

LEAVE BANKS – CBA & HSPBA COLLECTIVE AGREEMENTS

- During this extraordinary period, members may cancel pre-approved vacation and union leave. Cancellations will be at the discretion of the employee, and do not require mutual agreement. Any backfills that have been arranged will be redeployed.
- If you are instructed by a primary care provider to self-isolate, make sure you inform your employer, and you will be placed on paid general leave. This will not affect your other leave banks, including your sick bank.
- If you are a casual employee, you will be placed on a general leave of absence and compensated for any accepted shifts that were canceled because of the self-isolation requirement by a primary care provider.

- If you contract COVID-19, you will be placed on sick leave until such time as a primary care provider clears you for return to work.
- Contact your CUPE local if you have concerns about how your time is being coded if you are self-isolated.
- **Members who choose to travel outside of Canada after the March 12, 2020 direction of the Provincial Medical Health Officer to restrict travel, and to self-isolate for 14 days upon return, are not covered by general leave provisions for the 14-day self-isolation period. Travel after March 12 is a personal decision you would be taking against the advice and direction of public health officials, who have recommended no non-essential travel. You may want to check with your travel insurer what their position is on this situation.

WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH MY GRIEVANCE DURING THIS PERIOD?

The HPSBA and HEABC have reached an agreement to waive timelines for Employer responses to grievances. The waiver applies to all stages of the grievance process. This means that, if you have a grievance filed and in process, you will not hear about any stages in the process taking place for the period of the temporary agreement. The agreement is in effect until April 30, 2020, at which time the parties will assess the process.

MY GRIEVANCE WAS REFERRED TO ARBITRATION. WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH IT NOW?

Your CUPE National Representative has conducted grievances that have been referred to arbitration. They may have ongoing discussions with the employer in relation to the resolution of those grievances. The grievances may also be set for hearing. The CUPE National Representative will contact you if there is a development with your grievance. However, the HSPBA and HEABC have agreed that matters previously set for hearing until May 18 will be adjourned and rescheduled.