

Illness at Work: Guidance on reducing the risk of communicable disease transmission in food processing facilities

Guidance updated: May 20, 2022

Formatting updated: July 30, 2024

Definitions of key terms:

Food processing facility: In this guidance, food processing facilities include all food premises where food is packaged, distributed, transported, and/or processed. Food processing activities include washing, rinsing, cooking, smoking, salting, canning, freezing, pasteurizing, reprocessing, and packing, as well as shipping of food at distribution centres, slaughter facilities, and food manufacturing sites (for example, bakeries).¹

Worker: In this guidance, a food worker includes anyone who physically visits or is present at any time inside the food processing facility. This includes owners, operators, managers, supervisors, food handlers, cleaners, maintenance contractors, delivery workers, enforcement officials and anyone else who may be present where food is processed, packaged or handled.

Employers and owners/operators of food processing facilities must protect themselves and their workers from acquiring communicable diseases such as COVID-19 on the job. This document provides guidance on limiting the spread of illnesses at the workplace. Facilities should create and maintain a culture of workplace safety that embraces personal responsibility for wellness at the workplace supported by management and workers alike. Facilities can foster a culture of safety by including expectations for staff health and wellness in a communicable disease prevention plan. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of infection control and prevention measures to mitigate and prevent communicable diseases, keep workers healthy and food processing facilities operating. Food processing facilities in B.C. already have communicable disease prevention plans, policies and practices in place with COVID-19 safety plans that should contain written procedures to support activities that demonstrate compliance with procedures, visitor log records, worker health checks, and training records. Employers and owners/operators are required to provide information when requested by WorkSafeBC and other enforcement officials. WorkSafe BC has identified five elements of a successful communicable disease prevention plan: ventilation; hand hygiene; vaccine promotion; cleaning and sanitation; as well as worker illness policies. Please see this guidance for further details.²

This factsheet reviews managing illness at work.

Key principles to prevent spread of communicable diseases

There are three key principles to prevent illness at the workplace, including food processing facilities:

1. Building structures (referred to as the built environment) and reduction of communicable disease transmission risk.
 - This section covers ventilation, cleanliness, and sanitation at the work site, reducing crowding between workers, and cohorts (assign workers to the same shifts with the same coworkers).
2. Personal hygiene and personal protective equipment (PPE)
 - Hygiene practices and use of required PPE are measures to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, immunizations, and
3. **Managing illness at work**
 - **Workers' actions including reporting illnesses before arriving at work and while at work and staying home if sick.**

Throughout these sections administrative policies and protocols will be discussed.

Managing illness at work

Why are we still concerned about COVID-19 and other communicable diseases in food processing workplaces?

Food processing facilities are essential to provide food to our communities. However, food processing facilities can also pose a high risk of communicable disease transmission. These workplaces are often crowded with people and equipment, workers may be in close contact for long periods because of production line work, facilities are noisy, requiring workers to shout to be heard, environments are kept cold and moist to protect food, full use of personal protective equipment and barriers can be challenging, outbreaks and clusters have occurred. Workers may live or work in congregate settings, and shift work can lead to crowding in small, shared spaces, such as break rooms. Conditions in food processing facilities may allow rapid transmission of communicable diseases between workers when multiple layers of protection are not present. Worldwide, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) found that food processing facilities have become super spreader sites for COVID-19, leading to many outbreaks, worker deaths, and facility closures.³

The level of precaution taken at work sites should be directly informed by the level of illness within a community or within the facility itself. More stringent measures may be required in food processing facilities during times of high community transmission of communicable disease. Seasonally, for example during flu season, wearing masks to prevent spread of respiratory illness is an advisable precaution. Asymptomatic workers who do not appear to be ill may still be capable of spreading infections to other workers. Requiring all workers to wear masks during these periods will limit transmission of respiratory illness.

Employers and management must create a culture of workplace health and safety to prevent communicable disease transmission in the workplace. **Do not offer incentives that encourage workers to work when ill.** This spreads illness and has led to the death of workers in some facilities. Implementing policies to encourage workers to stay home when ill, having processes in place for workers to report illness and supervisors to identify illness in workers on site are important components to a facility’s communicable disease prevention plan. Employers and management should also take an active role in managing employee health through the promotion of vaccination for vaccine-preventable illnesses. In larger food processing facilities, it is advisable to include occupational health and safety as well as human resource staff in creating policies and providing training sessions to workers. Appoint safety coordinators to record and report on employee wellness when employees arrive at work and during work hours. Address worker concerns about communicable diseases. Create incentives that reward worker honesty, pro-active reporting, helping co-workers, and finding solutions that promote wellness and health among workers, such as completing all recommended vaccinations.

- Workers, contractors and visitors should complete a daily health check before they enter the facility, which includes a self-assessment for symptoms of illness:
 - Please visit BCCDC’s [symptoms of COVID-19](#) webpage for more information. If someone has symptoms, they should use the online [self-assessment tool](#) to see if they need further assessment by a health professional or testing.
 - Symptoms of:

| Respiratory illness | Gastroenteritis |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Fever or chills | Diarrhea |
| Cough | Nausea or vomiting |
| Loss of sense of smell or taste | Abdominal cramps |
| Difficulty breathing | Mild fever |
| Sore throat | Headache |
| Loss of appetite | Muscle pain |
| Runny nose | |
| Sneezing | |
| Extreme fatigue or tiredness | |
| Headache | |
| Body aches | |
| Nausea or vomiting | |
| Diarrhea | |

- Tools to assess workers should be used to identify and exclude ill workers from the site. Tools include self-assessment (daily health checks), kits that detect COVID-19 antigen, or other measures recommended by public health.
- Follow return-to-work policies for workers who have recovered from communicable diseases. These may be based on B.C. guidelines for food workers or part of COVID-19 self-isolation and quarantine requirements.⁴
- Communicable disease infections may require food workers to exclude themselves from work. Workers asked to take fecal testing should comply with public health measures and not work while actively ill.
- Support workers to stay at home with a sick leave policy. Use wage replacement programs to cover wages for ill staff.
- Implement a reporting policy for workers to communicate illness and absence by phone, e-mail or through an online app prior to arriving at the site.
- Employers/supervisors should have a staffing plan in place for worker illness other than relying solely on workers to find coverage for their shift.
- Provide workers with information and training on how to prevent illnesses at work and outside of work. Educate workers on communicable diseases, how they are transmitted, and what steps to take if they suspect they have become ill.
- Help workers, particularly temporary or foreign workers who may not be familiar with Canada's medical care system, that medical assistance is available. Find out and communicate support services to workers in the language they understand.
- Workers and owners/operators/employers must understand rights of workers regarding the disclosure of information about their illness.
 - Workers are not required to share test results with owners/operators/employers
 - Owners/operators/employers DO NOT have the right to ask workers for a copy of their test results

Workers who develop illness at work during their shift

- Develop policies to manage workers who develop illness on the site.
 - Encourage employees to report to their supervisors if they experience symptoms on-site.
 - Workers experiencing symptoms during their shift should go home, they should limit their contact with other workers before they go home, and they should monitor their symptoms to reduce the spread of illness.
 - Workers experiencing severe or life-threatening illness must be provided care. Contact emergency services immediately. Isolate these individuals from other workers for their privacy and provide care until emergency services arrive.

- When workers become ill and have identified themselves as ill at work, implement these measures:
 - Ask the worker to wear a mask,
 - Ask the worker to avoid contact with other workers,
 - Ask the worker to use a separate washroom facility, post a sign on the washroom so other workers do not enter, and
 - Ask the worker to go home.
- Workers and first aid attendants who are providing care to ill workers are advised to wear a mask and wash hands after contact with ill workers.
- Clean and disinfect work stations of ill workers and all areas where these workers may have been in while on-site. Clean and disinfect all high touch surfaces including washrooms, faucet handles, toilet levers, light switches, phones, door handles, and elevator buttons.
- When appropriate, communicate the illness to others who may carpool, share congregate living, or work in close proximity with the worker. Ask them to monitor for symptoms and if they are ill, report their illness and seek medical care.

¹ *Public Health Act*. Food Premises Regulation. Accessed from:

https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/11_210_99

² WorkSafe BC. Communicable Disease Prevention. Accessed from: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/law-policy/occupational-health-safety/searchable-ohs-regulation/ohs-guidelines/guidelines-for-workers-compensation-act#SectionNumber:G-P2-21>

³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. August 2021. COVID-19: Guidance for preventing transmission of COVID-19 within food businesses. Updated guidance. Accessed from: <http://www.fao.org/3/cb6030en/cb6030en.pdf>

⁴ BC Centre for Disease Control. Communicable Disease Control Enteric Cases and their Contacts: Exclusion from High Risk Settings (Last updated October 2020) Accessed from: http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Guidelines%20and%20Forms/Guidelines%20and%20Manuals/Epid/CD%20Manual/Chapter%201%20-%20CDC/Enteric%20Exclusions_Oct%202020%20FINAL.pdf and BC Centre for Disease Control. Self-Isolation and Self-Monitoring: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/self-isolation>