COVID-19 and health care workers: Frequently asked questions

March 11, 2020

B.C.’s health care system is on heightened alert to contain and slow the spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The BC Centre for Disease Control reports the situation regarding COVID-19 continues to evolve here in B.C., Canada and other jurisdictions in the world. The Ministry of Health, Office of the Provincial Health Officer and the BC Centre for Disease Control have plans to respond to this new illness and the B.C. Health System is preparing for the possibility of a pandemic.

HSA continues participate in regular briefings by Provincial Health Officer Bonnie Henry, the Ministry of Health, and employers.

Up to date information from the BC Centre for Disease Control on pandemic planning can be found here.

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

**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 when coughing or sneezing
  - avoid others who are unwell
  - stay home when you are sick. If you see a health care provider, be sure to contact them ahead of time so you can be assessed safely

- **Masks and personal protective equipment**
  - Patients under investigation should be managed with contact and droplet precautions (including eye protection) - Please note that safety glasses do not offer adequate protection from microbes. Face shields or goggles offer splash resistance to protect workers from blood and body fluid sprays and splashes.
  - Nasoparyngeal (NP) swabs and throat swabs can be performed using contact and droplet precautions with surgical mask and eye protection, and do not require the use of an N95 respirator.
  - Airborne precautions including N95 respirators with eye protection should be used during aerosol-generating procedures (e.g. open suctioning of respiratory tract, intubation, bronchoscopy, cardiopulmonary resuscitation).
  - Document: Respiratory Protection for Health Care Workers Caring for Potential or Confirmed COVID-19 Patients

**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 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.
  - 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.
  - Contact your HSA steward or a staff labour relations officer if you have concerns about how your time is being coded if you are self-isolated.
  - 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.

**Travel and Self-Isolation**

- If you have recently returned from travel to an area where there has been a COVID-19 outbreak and public health officials have issued a travel advisory for self-isolation, self-isolate and advise your employer, and you will be placed on a paid general leave of absence. As of March 11, 2019, travel advisories for self-isolation are in place for people returning from Hubei province in China, Iran, and Italy.
- If you have travelled to an area not designated a COVID-19 affected region, are asymptomatic but believe you may have been exposed to COVID-19, contact 8-1-1 or your primary care provider and self-isolate if so directed. Contact your employer, and you will be placed on paid leave.
- You should continue to self-monitor, and if you develop any flu-like symptoms, contact your primary care provider or 8-1-1. If you are instructed to self-isolate while awaiting testing, contact your employer, and you will be placed on paid leave.

**Leave banks - HEABC COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT MEMBERS**

- 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.
- 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 HSA steward or a staff labour relations officer if you have concerns about how your time is being coded if you are self-isolated.