# Emergency Response and Business Continuity Planning for Respiratory Infectious Diseases (RIDs) Outbreaks

## Introduction

All employers in Canada must take reasonable precautions to make the workplace safe. Employers can help keep workers from getting hurt or sick by having a plan to deal with emergencies, and also by having a business continuity plan to keep the workplace functioning during and after an emergency.

This guidance document can help workplaces build or update both their emergency response and business continuity plans to prepare for respiratory infectious disease outbreaks.

## Emergency response plan

An emergency response plan includes procedures for handling sudden or unexpected situations that can result in harm to people. Refer to Emergency Planning for guidance on how to create an emergency response plan. The key elements of an emergency response plan are shown below and provide specific tips on creating a plan for respiratory infectious diseases.

## Key elements of an emergency response plan

### Identify the hazards

The emergency response plan starts with an understanding of workplace hazards, possible emergencies, and potential consequences:

- Complete a risk assessment to identify hazards (e.g., a virus or bacteria that can cause a respiratory infectious disease)

- Identify all possible emergencies (e.g., all workers in a department become sick with a respiratory infectious disease at the same time)

- Identify the potential consequences (e.g., spread of a respiratory infectious disease among workers, sick workers needing medical care, lost productivity due to absences)

### Understand the workplace

Characteristics of the workplace can affect how easily a respiratory infectious disease can spread and impact the normal work functions. Some factors to consider include:

- Size of the workforce

- Physical layout of the workplace (e.g., individuals working very closely together)

- Capabilities in an emergency, including trained personnel and response equipment

- How quickly outside aid can be received

- The capacity of the local public health authority and primary care hospitals

### Understand the actions to take

Document required actions, written procedures, and available resources for employees.

- Prepare written emergency response procedures that explain how to respond to different events

- Detail how to respond to someone being sick with a respiratory infectious disease in the workplace

- Include how to contact emergency response personnel (names of people and their emergency response roles, work locations, cell phone numbers, and alternate contact details)

- Include a list of external resources (local public health authority, occupational health and safety department, workers' compensation board, nearest hospital, etc.)

- Consider specific elements such as:

  ○ Availability of personal protective equipment (PPE)

  ○ Transportation methods if a sick individual requires hospitalization

  ○ Safe disposal of contaminated items (e.g., used PPE and cleaning materials)

  ○ Notification procedures for relevant authorities, if required

  ○ Cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces and objects

  ○ Where sick individuals can isolate on workplace premises (if isolation is recommended by the government authorities)

- Provide communication and training about the plan, including written instructions for each person about their specific responsibilities

- Inform external stakeholders of any changes that could impact them

- When updating the emergency procedures to include control measures for respiratory infectious diseases, make sure that the fire code and other applicable legislation are still followed, and no new hazards are created

- Test the plan to make sure it will work. Run drills and exercises, review the results, and make improvements as needed

- Review at least annually or when hazards, control measures, or regulations change

**Emergency response personnel, equipment, and supplies**

An emergency response plan should document the resources necessary to appropriately respond to a respiratory infectious disease outbreak in the workplace. A workplace committee, comprised of health and safety experts, members of the health and safety committee, and subject matter experts, can create this custom plan.

Roles and responsibilities within the emergency response plan should be clearly defined, documented, and communicated. Some important roles include:

- Incident commander: overall in charge of responding to an outbreak. Gives instructions to other internal emergency responders, facilitates communication, and authorizes use of emergency resources

- First aider: can assess sick individuals, provide respirators or masks, and arrange for an ambulance, if required

There can be additional responsibilities that are not assigned to a specific role, such as improving indoor ventilation (e.g., by opening windows). These can be assigned by the incident commander.

Equipment and supplies identified in the emergency response plan should be kept in stock and readily accessible. These may include:

- Respirators or medical masks

- Impervious gloves (e.g., nitrile gloves)

- Emergency contact list

**Drills and exercises**

Practising the response to a respiratory infectious disease outbreak in the workplace helps prepare workers should a real incident occur. Drills and exercises help test the emergency response plan, build workers' competence for an efficient response, and identify areas for improvement. It is important that all workers know how to respond to a sick individual in the workplace, but this scenario may not typically require a drill. Consider a drill or exercise scenario where a worker begins experiencing severe symptoms of a respiratory infectious disease (e.g., difficulty breathing) and requires emergency care. Other scenarios relevant to your workplace that form part of the emergency response plan can be added to a schedule.

Considerations for drills and exercises:

- Follow the guidance from the applicable emergency response procedure when conducting drills and exercises

- Have a schedule and plan ahead

- Record the occurrence and make notes of important details such as workers being potentially exposed to a respiratory infectious disease or not knowing what to do

- Make improvements as necessary

**Business continuity plan**

A business continuity plan describes how the organization will continue to function during and after an emergency, disaster, or similar event (such as a respiratory infectious disease outbreak). It involves planning how services, products, and operations can continue, and the recovery of key business and systems.

While each organization is unique, the following should be considered during a respiratory infectious disease outbreak:

- Knowing which key factors are essential for the workplace to continue functioning
- How to implement and follow the control measures needed to help prevent the spread of the disease, while supporting existing business activities
- How your core business activities can be maintained for several weeks or months with limited staff or other key resources
- How to maintain staffing levels and productivity. Plan on people being unable to report to work for various reasons (e.g., sickness, accommodation, child or elder care, etc.)
- Where to find reliable sources of public health and occupational health information
- Coordination and communication with stakeholders

Refer to Flu and Infectious Disease Outbreaks Business Continuity Plan for guidance on how to create a business continuity plan for respiratory infectious diseases. The sections below provide additional tips in creating a plan.

## Key elements of a business continuity plan

### Understand the business

The level of detail needed for a business continuity plan depends on the type, size, and complexity of the workplace. Identify the key factors needed to continue functioning:

- Critical processes, operations, and functions
- Internal and external dependencies

Some factors to consider include:

- Cross-trained workers (i.e., workers who can temporarily take on non-routine responsibilities if their colleagues are absent)
- Availability of essential equipment (e.g., laptop computers for remote work)
- External supply of materials, equipment, and services (e.g., primary and secondary suppliers of materials needed to produce a product for customers)
- Internal supplies (e.g., stockpile of essential PPE)
- Established communication methods and contacts (e.g., a contact list with phone numbers and email addresses, an organizational chart that clearly identifies chain of command)

### Understand the actions to take

- Document the business continuity plan
- Ensure the plan has accounts for all shortcomings identified (see "Understand the business" above) and that all recommendations are in place
- Aim for quick resumption of interrupted operations
- Establish communication systems with stakeholders and keep them informed
- Make sure all workers know about the plan and their responsibilities within the plan
- Cross-train workers to act as reinforcements (back-ups) for essential (or all) functions
- Test the plan to make sure it will work (e.g., allow back-up personnel to run operations)
- Plan for recovery so that operations can eventually return to normal
- Review at least annually or when business needs, hazards, or regulations change, and involve senior management in these reviews

### Business continuity resources

A business continuity plan should document the resources necessary to maintain business operations when a respiratory infectious disease disrupts normal work. A committee can create a customized plan that clearly defines roles, responsibilities, and actions to be taken to safely maintain business operations.

Some considerations for business continuity resources include:

- Personnel, finances, information, equipment

- Written mutual aid agreements with other organizations, where appropriate

- Facilities for emergency operations centres, as necessary

### Drills and exercises

Drills and exercises test the business continuity plan, help ensure that operations can continue even as a respiratory infectious disease disrupts normal operations, and identify areas for improvement. Consider a drill or exercise scenario where a significant percentage of the workforce becomes sick and is unable to work. Other scenarios relevant to your workplace that form part of the business continuity plan can be added to a schedule.

## Change Management

Emergency response and business continuity plans attempt to prepare for and respond to events that could affect workers and business operations. Emergency events can sometimes present unique, unforeseen challenges. All changes to established plans must undergo a change management process to ensure that they produce the best results and do not create new hazards. Have a change management process that assesses the risk of all changes and monitors the results for future improvements.

## Resources

- [Business Continuity Plan - Pandemic](#) – CCOHS
- [Pandemic Planning e-course](#) – CCOHS
- [Emergency Response Planning Guide](#) – CCOHS
- [Infection Prevention and Control for Respiratory Infectious Diseases (RIDs)](#) – CCOHS

For further information on respiratory infectious diseases, including COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) .

**Disclaimer:** As public and occupational health and safety information may continue to change, local public health authorities should be consulted for specific, regional guidance. This information is not intended to replace medical advice or legislated health and safety obligations. Although every effort is made to ensure the accuracy, currency, and completeness of the information, CCOHS does not guarantee, warrant, represent or undertake that the information provided is correct, accurate or current. CCOHS is not liable for any loss, claim, or demand arising directly or indirectly from any use or reliance upon the information.