



HEALTH HAZARD ALERT

SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)

Volume 1

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This Health Hazard Alert for OPSEU members is provided to supplement information from Public Health, Health Canada and employers, and explains your rights under the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act.

Is the number of cases of SARS increasing?

In Ontario, there are now 27 cases of SARS. All cases have occurred in persons returning from Asia or having had contact with SARS cases in the household or in a healthcare setting. There have been a total of three deaths from SARS in Ontario. As of today, the Ministry of Health, and the Commissioners of Public Safety and of Public Health and Long-Term Care, report that all of Ontario's probable and suspect cases are either stable or improving.

Around the world the number of cases reported has increased mostly because a large number of cases from China had not been reported previously. The total number of cases world wide is now reported to be 1,408. Fifty-three of these cases have resulted in death.

What preventive measures are being taken by Acute Care Hospitals in the province?

Dr. James Young, Commissioner of Public Security and Dr. Colin D'Cunha, Commissioner of Public Health issued the following directives today:

PROVINCIAL DIRECTIVES TO ALL ACUTE CARE HOSPITALS

1. All hospitals outside the GTA and Simcoe County to post the attached sign requiring patients who have met criteria for suspected SARS cases to apply a surgical mask and report to the Triage Nurse.
2. All patients and individuals accompanying patients entering a hospital emergency department in the GTA (Toronto, York Region, Durham Region, Peel Region, and Halton Region) and Simcoe County must apply a surgical mask prior to entering the department.
3. All staff in GTA and Simcoe County hospital emergency departments and clinics to wear protective clothing (gloves, gown, eye protection and mask - N95 or equivalent).
4. No visitors to GTA and Simcoe County hospitals except for parents of children and

visitors to critically ill patients. All visitors must be registered and wear a surgical mask.

5. No volunteers at hospitals in the GTA and Simcoe County.
6. All hospitals are advised to restrict the number of entrances to control access.
7. No transfers from hospitals outside the GTA and Simcoe County into hospitals in the GTA.
8. No non-urgent transfers between healthcare facilities in the GTA and Simcoe County.
9. All deliveries to hospitals in the GTA and Simcoe County are to be directed to the receiving area. Hospital staff are to undertake deliveries within the hospital. This includes all flower deliveries. Courier and laboratory specimen deliveries will follow the usual protocols with delivery personnel required to wear a surgical mask.
10. Each GTA and Simcoe County hospital to establish a SARS specific isolation unit. It is anticipated that this will require the rescheduling of some or all elective surgeries. Hospitals greater than 500 beds will be expected to provide a 30-bed unit each. Hospitals with fewer than 400 beds will be expected to provide 15-bed unit each (see criteria below).
11. All GTA and Simcoe County hospitals to review their staff and external trades to identify who have worked at The Scarborough Hospital - Grace Division since March 16th. These individuals must not work at another healthcare institution until ten symptom free days following their last contact with the Grace Division.

Dr. James Young, Commissioner of Public Security
 Dr. Colin D'Cunha, Commissioner of Public Health

Are there other measures that should be taken to protect health care workers?

If there are OPSEU members who have concerns that their employer is not taking all reasonable precautions to protect their health and safety, they should request that their Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) call an emergency meeting to discuss those concerns and to address them.

While we recognize that hospital employers are working diligently to ensure that all of their infection control precautions are in place and working effectively to stop the spread of SARS among the patient population and the general population, worker health and safety must also be addressed. In some cases infection control procedures that are in place may be adequate to protect workers; in other facilities that have not admitted any patients with SARS there may be little in place. It is critical that the employer and Joint Health and Safety Committees (JHSC) address these issues and act proactively.

What measures are being taken to protect workers who work directly with the public outside of the hospital sector?

OPSEU has received a number of calls from members who work closely with the public delivering services such as driver examinations and the issuing of health cards. These

workers have received no instruction from their employer about any precautions they should take to protect themselves from possible infection.

Currently, there are no guidelines from either the Commissioner of Public Security or Public Health to assist employers or workers to determine how best to protect their health and safety.

OPSEU recommends that if workers at any worksite have concerns about their health and safety because of the SARS outbreak they should:

- Express those concerns immediately to their supervisor and ask what precautions, if any, they should be taking
- If workers are not satisfied with the response from their supervisor, they should approach their OPSEU representative on the JHSC and request that an emergency meeting of the JHSC be called to address those concerns
- Issues to consider are: whether it is necessary to wear respiratory protection in some cases when dealing with the public; whether it is possible to wash your hands after contact with persons who may be ill with SARS; whether there are some clients you should not serve if they are obviously ill with a respiratory infection; whether there is a reliable method to screen clients before serving them.

As stated above, currently there are no guidelines in Ontario to address those issues. At this point Health Canada is not recommending that anyone in any workplace wear respiratory protection except in health care facilities where they are caring for patients.

It is OPSEU's position that all employers who have workers who deal with the public must consider the issue, seek advice from the Ministry of Health, Public Health and other experts regarding any measures they should be taking to protect the safety and health of their employees.

All workers have the right under Section 43 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act to refuse work that they believe endangers their health and safety. For information on the Right to Refuse unsafe work, consult with your OPSEU steward or OPSEU Health and Safety representative. Also more information can be found on the Health and Safety page of the OPSEU website in the booklet, "A Worker's Guide to the Occupational Health and Safety Act."

For more information, contact OPSEU's Health and Safety Unit: 1-800-268-7376, 416-443-8888, extension 772. Check the OPSEU website at www.opseu.org for future updates.

Useful Links:

Health Canada for updates and Guidelines: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/sars-sras

Toronto Public Health updates: www.toronto.ca/health

Centres for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/