



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, Ministry of Health, and Health Canada, and explains your rights under the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act.

How many cases of SARS are there in Ontario now? What is the difference between probable and suspect cases?

As of March 31, Health Canada was reporting 53 probable and 58 suspect cases of SARS in Ontario. On April 1, the media reports a total of 111 probable and suspect cases in Ontario. Since the illness was first discovered in Canada, six people have died of SARS, all of them in Ontario. A small number of patients with SARS have now recovered and have been discharged from hospital. The majority of hospitalized cases are reported as stable and/or improving.

Across Canada there are 129 probable or suspect cases. They are in British Columbia, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Health Canada defines probable and suspect as follows:

“Probable” cases of SARS are similar to suspect cases, but often are more severely ill and have more difficulty breathing. Their chest x-rays may show signs of atypical pneumonia.

A “suspect” case is a person who: develops a fever and one or more respiratory symptoms including cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing within 10 days of returning from travel to areas in Asia where SARS cases are reported; or, a person who develops fever and one or more respiratory symptoms within 10 days of having close contact (ie. within one metre) with a “probable” case of SARS.

What are the latest developments in the health care sector?

Acute Care Hospitals outside of the GTA and Simcoe County

On March 31, the Commissioner of Public Security and Commissioner of Public Health announced that the restrictive hospital measures currently being applied in the GTA and Simcoe County are to be extended province-wide in an attempt to contain the spread of SARS.

These measures include:

- restricting visitors
- screening staff, patients, visitors and others for SARS symptoms and possible contact with SARS patients

- having security personnel and police staff available to enforce these precautions
- suspending non-urgent patient transfers between facilities
- ensuring that emergency and critical care employees wear personal protective equipment: N95 masks, eye protection, gloves, gowns
- staff outside of emergency and critical care are to wear respiratory protection (N95 mask or equivalent)

Currently, OPSEU is hearing some anecdotal reports of a shortage of N95 masks. However, it appears that within the hospital sector, those shortages are being addressed quickly. Insist that the employer provide you with the proper respiratory protection as per the Commissioner of Public Safety Directive.

In addition, the provincial directives point out that the N95 masks should be fit-tested to ensure that the masks offer adequate protection. Masks will not provide an adequate seal if the worker has a beard where the face and the mask meet. Ask your supervisor and Occupational Health Department for assistance if you have any doubts about the fit of your mask and its ability to protect you. The companies that produce the masks must provide written instructions with the masks on how to check the face seal, how long the masks can be worn and when to consider the masks contaminated.

Long Term Care Facilities, Rehabilitation and Chronic Hospitals in GTA/Simcoe County

Provincial directives have also set out new restrictive procedures for long-term care facilities as well as rehab and chronic hospitals. The procedures are much the same for both sorts of facilities with some differences in when protective equipment is to be worn. The protective measures include:

- restrictions on the number of visitors
- restricted access to each facility through one staff entrance and one public entrance
- screening staff, patients, visitors and others for SARS symptoms and possible contact with SARS patients
- identify patients/residents who has been treated in the GTA/Simcoe County in the last 10 days
- in all GTA/Simcoe County long term care facilities, staff to wear gowns, gloves, N95 masks and eye protection, whether or not they have identified possible SARS patients
- in all rehab and chronic care hospitals:
 - all staff in any part of hospital to wash hands frequently and use N95 masks
 - hospital staff who visit patient care unit to wash hands frequently, wear N95 mask and isolation gown
 - for direct patient care, staff to wash hands frequently, use N95 masks, wear isolation gown, gloves, protective eyewear
- use new transfer policies for all patient transfers
- in long term care facilities, identify staff who work in more than one facility

Community Care Access Centres in GTA/Simcoe County

There are directives to restrict community referrals and transfers between long term care facilities. CCAC staff are to be screened daily for symptoms or possible exposure to SARS cases.

In addition, protocols have been issued to assist CCACs make decisions about making home visits. Staff will make home visits to new clients who have been assessed as eligible for essential services in the last 10 days and will wear gowns, gloves, N95 masks and eye protection. The need for staff to visit new clients who are eligible for non-essential services will be considered.

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-dgsp/sars-sras

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

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

World Health Organization for daily updates and guidelines: www.who.int/csr/sars/

Ministry of Health: www.health.gov.on.ca