



# **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.

### **Are there any new cases of SARS diagnosed in Ontario?**

One additional case of SARS has been diagnosed in Ontario since yesterday. There are now 28 cases in Ontario and one in British Columbia. The number of deaths has remained unchanged at three. All cases have occurred in persons returning from Asia or having had contact with SARS cases in the household or in a health care setting. Five cases occurred in a single extended family.

Health Canada reports that 19 of the Ontario cases have been among health care and hospital workers who worked in one hospital. The majority of these cases are thought to have contracted the illness as a result of unprotected contact with the initial SARS cases before they were diagnosed.

Around the world, there are now 1,485 cases resulting in 53 deaths.

### **What precautions should employers be taking to ensure that OPSEU members are working safely?**

#### Hospital Sector

- In the hospital sector, employers should be following the guidelines produced by Health Canada published on March 24, 2003. See references to the Guidelines in our first Health Hazard Alert, March 26. The guidelines are posted on the Health Canada website at: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/sars-ssras](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/sars-ssras)
- OPSEU has been informed that some hospitals are informing workers that the N95 masks recommended by Health Canada **only** have to be worn by workers involved in the care of patients in isolation. Those employers state that surgical masks provide “acceptable protection.” To date Health Canada continues to state that the N95 masks are preferable when assessing suspect cases, although surgical masks may be worn. OPSEU continues to recommend that the N95 masks be worn for triage and to assess suspect SARS cases. When caring for SARS cases, the N95 mask must be worn.

## Non-Hospital Sector

- Outside of the hospital sector in the OPS, the employer has not yet provided adequate direction to OPSEU members regarding any special precautions, protective equipment or screening of client contacts. The employer did produce and distribute an all-OPS staff Question and Answer document that attempts to answer some questions.
- Note that the OPS Q and A document states that the “requirement for protective equipment depends on the circumstances of each workplace and the nature of the services provided.” If you have health and safety concerns in your workplace, draw your employer’s attention to that point and ask what precautions, if any, you and your fellow-workers should be taking.
- If workers are not satisfied with the response from their supervisor, they should approach their OPSEU representative on the Joint Health and Safety Committee (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.
- The OPS Q and A document also gives advice about payment, if you are unable to work because of illness or quarantine. Please consult with your OPSEU staff representative before agreeing to use your short-term sickness credits or any other credits. Some cases will be compensable under WSIB.
- OPSEU has received no inquiries from members outside of the Ontario Public Service. However, if non-OPS workers have SARS-related Health and Safety concerns, the same guidelines apply. Speak to your supervisor and if not satisfied seek advice from your OPSEU Health and Safety representative and request an emergency meeting of the JHSC to discuss these issues.

Currently there are no guidelines in Ontario to address those workplace health and safety issues related to SARS. 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.

OPSEU’s position is 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.

### **Do OPSEU members have the Right to Refuse work that they believe is unsafe?**

#### Healthcare workers

- Under Section 43 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), workers in healthcare facilities do not have the right to refuse unsafe work if the hazard is a normal part of their work or when their refusal directly endangers another person.

- Healthcare workers do have the right to refuse if their refusal does not directly endanger another person and the employer has not taken steps to address the hazards.
- It is your employer's responsibility to ensure workers at risk have all the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and understand how to use it to protect themselves. The employer must advise you of the risks, provide the correct respiratory protection (N95 masks), ensure you know how to test the face seal of the mask, provide you with gloves, gowns and eye protection when appropriate, and ensure you wear the equipment when needed. The employer must provide a written infection control policy and protocol.
- If you do not have the appropriate PPE or do not understand when or how to use it, you have the right to protect yourself under the OHSA and to exercise your Right to Refuse unsafe work. If you believe your employer is not taking every reasonable precaution to protect your health and safety, and you are considering a work refusal, contact your OPSEU Staff Representative or OPSEU Health and Safety Officer.
- Some employers are developing new policies on the Right to Refuse that do not comply with the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Please consult with your OPSEU staff representative or OPSEU Health and Safety Officer if you have questions about this right.

#### Non-Healthcare workers

- Your Right to Refuse unsafe work is unchanged by the SARS outbreak. 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](http://www.opseu.org) for future updates.

#### **Useful Links:**

Health Canada for updates and Guidelines: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/sars-sras](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/sars-sras)

Toronto Public Health updates: [www.toronto.ca/health](http://www.toronto.ca/health)

Centres for Disease Control: [www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/)

World Health Organization for daily updates and guidelines: [www.who.int/csr/sars/](http://www.who.int/csr/sars/)