# Return to Work After COVID-19: What Plans Should You Make?

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As an employer, you are probably preparing for the reopening of the workplace in a pandemic setting and actively planning for your employees' return to work.

To help you in your thought process and preparations, we have prepared a list of items that you should address or consider in order to make the return to work as safe and effective as possible.

While we don't claim that ours is an exhaustive list, it does provide a general overview of things to consider before you resume your activities. Note that each business and industry is different and will need a specifically tailored plan.

Our professionals are available to help you implement your return-to-work plan.

**Key planning steps**

## Risk Assessment

Before your employees return to work, conduct a site inspection to identify potential COVID-19 transmission or contamination risks.
Implement measures to prevent and control identified risks with the collaboration of your employees, to the extent possible, and their union representatives, if any.
Make sure that work methods comply with guidelines issued by the CNESST, the government and public health officials.
Develop a plan to gradually reopen your workplace and share this plan with your employees.
Encourage your employees to participate in identifying workplace risks and provide them with a forum or mechanism to make it easy for them to participate.

## Prevention

Develop a procedure for checking employee and visitor health to avoid contagion in the workplace as much as

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possible. This may be done through a questionnaire, screening or self-reporting.
Issue a directive that all workers and visitors must be vigilant and notify the employer if they experience COVID-19-like symptoms such as a fever or cough, difficulty breathing or sudden loss of smell or taste, or any other symptoms that government authorities may add, before reporting to the workplace.[1]
Set rules regarding hygiene, including hand washing, and respiratory etiquette at work[2].
Develop an environmental hygiene procedure involving daily disinfection of workplaces, objects and surfaces.[3]
Establish a procedure for isolating and managing employees or visitors who have symptoms in the workplace, as well as a procedure for disinfecting the premises.
Encourage employees at higher risk of developing serious or severe complications from COVID-19 infection to follow appropriate prevention measures.
Stay abreast of updates and guidelines issued by government, public health or occupational health and safety authorities, and follow them.

## Physical Distancing

Issue clear guidelines regarding the physical distancing rules[4] and how employees and visitors are responsible for respecting them.
Inform employees and others such as customers, suppliers and business partners of these rules through the use of posters, memos, etc.
Encourage telework for all employees wherever possible in order to reduce the number of employees on-site.
Take steps to ensure that physical distancing is respected, and make certain that everyone can do so every day by rearranging workstations and work schedules, installing physical barriers, closing common areas, arranging or coordinating access to workplaces, installing contactless equipment, using technological means, holding virtual meetings, arranging for flexible hours, changing work methods, and so forth.
Revisit the organization of any in-person events or gatherings and consider holding these virtually or postponing them.
Prohibit social practices that violate distancing rules, such as shaking hands.
Develop protocols for the use of elevators or common areas.

## Policies

Review your telework policies or procedures.
Check your workplace civility or harassment prevention policies and update them to include virtual communications.
Review your policies relative to attendance and leave for family or medical reasons in preparation for possible COVID-19-related absences.
Create a policy or procedure for the return to work of employees who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, who think they may have COVID-19 or who have been exposed to someone who has contracted the disease[5].
Develop procedures to monitor for positive COVID-19 cases in order to notify persons who have been exposed and prevent further spread.
Review your occupational health and safety policies in light of these COVID-19 contamination prevention measures.

## Communication

Before employees return to work, inform them of the risks related to their work, including those related to COVID-19, and the preventive measures put in place to prevent and control these risks.
Provide training on each employee's role and responsibility in preventing the risk of COVID-19 transmission and contamination and guidelines to be followed.
If you provide or recommend protective equipment, make sure that employees are trained to use such equipment in a safe and optimal manner.
Inform employees of any revised or updated policies and explain the practical aspects of these policies to them, where necessary. Maintain training logs and have employees acknowledge that they have read updated policies with a signature.
Train supervisors and managers to help them monitor compliance and enforcement of new occupational health and safety rules and procedures.
Stay abreast of updates and guidelines issued by the CNESST and government and public health authorities.
Inform your employees of any important updates.
Be respectful of employee privacy.
Do not tolerate any violation of your occupational health and safety guidelines, policies and procedures.

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# Other Considerations

Assess the psychosocial risks inherent to a pandemic context, such as balancing telework and family, providing support for loved ones, working in a different work climate, etc.
Prepare what your response will be should some employees refuse to return to work for various reasons, whether or not they can do so legally.
Be aware of tax legislation or legislation regarding unemployment insurance or emergency benefits—for example, the need to update an employee's Record of Employment if work is available but they refuse to return to work for a reason deemed invalid.
Be familiar with laws involving labour standards, discrimination, privacy, occupational health and safety and industrial accidents.
Develop an emergency response plan now to deal with a possible second wave of the pandemic or a spike in infections following the reopening of workplaces or the lifting of the lockdown.
Start to consider a future plan to resume pre-pandemic activities such as business travel, client visits, team meetings, events, etc.
Encourage employees to raise questions or concerns and designate a contact person to dialogue with them.

The professionals of our Labour and Employment team can assist you in implementing these measures, and others, as you resume your activities.

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1. For more information on the exclusion or isolation of workers during a pandemic, consult the CNESST reference document.
2. For more details on respiratory etiquette, consult the CNESST reference document.
3. For more details on maintaining a hygienic environment during a pandemic, consult the CNESST reference document.
4. For more details on physical distancing in the workplace, consult the CNESST reference document.
5. See the INSPQ's recommendations [French only] on the rules to follow when isolation is lifted.

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