

## **General Guide on Applying the OHS Regulation to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)**

### **General Information on SARS**

- Introduction
- What is SARS?
- What are the symptoms of SARS and when do they occur?
- How is SARS spread?
- What is the treatment for SARS?
- How could persons be exposed to SARS?
- Where can I find up-to-date information on SARS?

### **WCB Prevention Division – Regulatory Requirements**

- What is “occupational exposure” to SARS?
- Exposure control plan
- Refusal of unsafe work (section 3.12)
- Summary

## **General Information on SARS**

### **Introduction**

Recently, the World Health Organization has received reports of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), also known as “atypical pneumonia,” from various parts of the world. Health Canada is monitoring confirmed reports of outbreaks of SARS in China (Guangdong Province and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), Vietnam (city of Hanoi), and Singapore, as well as the occurrence of isolated cases in other countries.

### **What is SARS?**

“Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome” refers to a group of mainly respiratory symptoms for which the cause is currently unknown.

### **What are the symptoms of SARS and when do they occur?**

The symptoms of SARS include: fever (higher than 38° Celsius), dry cough, and shortness of breath or breathing difficulties. SARS may also be associated with other symptoms such as headache, muscle stiffness, sore throat, and fatigue. Some persons may experience increasingly severe breathing symptoms over the course of about a week; they may require oxygen support and sometimes mechanical breathing (intubation).

The incubation period for SARS appears to be from 2 to 14 days.

### **How is SARS spread?**

SARS appears to be spread by close contact with ill persons. Close contact means caring for, living with, or having face-to-face (within one metre) or direct contact with a person who has SARS or with secretions from his or her nose, mouth, or throat or other bodily fluids. This may occur through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes near another person. Viruses

may be spread through saliva, usually by kissing or by sharing food, drinking glasses, cigarettes, or other items that have contacted the mouth of a person with the infection.

The World Health Organization reports that SARS is not highly contagious when protective measures are used and the percentage of cases that have been fatal is low (about 3%).

### **What is the treatment for SARS?**

According to the World Health Organization, at this time no drug can be recommended for prevention or treatment. Antibiotics do not appear to be effective. Patients with SARS are treated for their symptoms.

### **How could persons be exposed to SARS?**

Individuals who may be at risk of exposure to SARS are those who have recently travelled to high-risk sites (China – Guangdong Province and Hong Kong; Vietnam – Hanoi; and Singapore).

These individuals should monitor their health for 14 days following their departure from these areas, but may attend work or school. Should they experience a high fever and one or more of the following respiratory symptoms – cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing – medical advice should be sought as soon as possible. If an employer is aware that an individual at the work site meets these criteria, the employer must instruct that individual to leave the workplace and to seek medical advice. Note: the ill person should call ahead to his or her personal physician to arrange a consultation, not go to the physician's office before calling.

Workers may be exposed to the risk of SARS if they come in close contact with individuals at work who are ill with SARS. To date, the majority of SARS cases are hospital workers who have cared for SARS patients.

### **Where can I find up-to-date information on SARS?**

The Health Canada Web site contains specific infection control guidance for various occupations. For further and continually updated information on SARS visit the following Web sites:

World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/csr/sars/en/>

Health Canada: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>

BC Centre for Disease Control: <http://www.bccdc.org>

Government of Hong Kong (Chinese language): <http://www.info.gov.hk/dh/new/index.htm>

## **WCB Prevention Division – Regulatory Requirements**

Section 6.34 of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation requires the employer to implement an exposure control plan where a worker has or may have occupational exposure to a bloodborne pathogen or other biohazardous material as specified by the Workers' Compensation Board. The Board has determined that the micro-organism causing SARS constitutes a “biohazardous material,” and is within the scope of section 6.34, Biohazardous Materials – Exposure Control Plan:

<http://regulation.healthandsafetycentre.org/s/Part6.asp#SectionNumber:6.34>

## What is “occupational exposure” to SARS?

The definition of "occupational exposure" applies to all workers who could reasonably be anticipated to be at risk of harmful contact with bloodborne pathogens, or other potentially biohazardous materials, as a result of performing their regular or assigned job duties. This section is not intended to cover the risk of contracting common infections like colds or the flu that are typically also encountered outside the work environment. The definition of "harmful contact" will vary depending on the specific organism and its route of transmission. See OHS Guideline G6.33-2, Biohazardous Materials – Occupational Exposure:

<http://regulation.healthandsafetycentre.org/s/GuidelinePart6.asp#SectionNumber:G6.33-2>

For the pathogen causing SARS, harmful contact may occur when caring for, living with, or having face-to-face (within one metre) or direct contact with a person who has SARS or with secretions from his or her nose, mouth, or throat or other bodily fluids.

### Exposure control plan

An employer must implement an exposure control plan where it can be *reasonably* anticipated that a worker will have occupational exposure to SARS. Such workers would include health care personnel who are providing care for, or are exposed to, patients with SARS. The employer must identify the workers at risk, develop safe work procedures, and provide adequate education and training. Engineering controls, such as isolation rooms, should form part of the exposure control plan. Based on advice from the World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int/csr/ars/infectioncontrol/en/>), exposed workers would be expected to wear an N95 mask, gloves, goggles, a disposable gown, an apron, and footwear that can be decontaminated.

Based on currently available medical information, individuals who are not exhibiting symptoms of SARS are not infectious. Where it cannot reasonably be expected that workers will be dealing with individuals ill with SARS, employers are not expected to implement an exposure control plan. In workplaces such as airports, schools, and libraries, workers may encounter individuals returning from affected areas. In such workplaces, the employer is required to conduct a risk assessment and implement controls if it can reasonably be anticipated that workers will be dealing with individuals ill with SARS.

### Refusal of unsafe work (section 3.12)

A worker has the right to refuse any work which that person has “*reasonable* cause to believe ... would create an undue hazard to the health and safety of any person.” Should that situation arise, the worker must follow the protocol set out in section 3.12 (procedure for refusal of unsafe work) of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation:

<http://regulation.healthandsafetycentre.org/s/Part3.asp#SectionNumber:3.12>

If an employer requires a worker to work with a known or suspected case of SARS, without providing the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and safe work procedures, then this would clearly constitute a case where there is undue risk to that worker’s health.

Based on currently available information, there is not an undue hazard to a worker’s health in circumstances where he or she works with other workers or members of the public who are not ill and show no symptoms of SARS, even if those individuals have recently travelled from affected areas in the Far East.

## Summary

- Although the prevalence of SARS appears to be highest in certain areas in the Far East, it is not reasonable for employers to isolate workers from persons returning from those areas, unless those individuals exhibit symptoms of SARS.
- Workers who are at risk of exposure to SARS (for example, health care and hospital workers) can obtain specific information on recommended precautionary measures and personal protective equipment from Health Canada's Web site and their employer.

**This Guide is for general information only. Any action by an Officer of the WCB must be based on site-specific circumstances.**