

Compliance Cheat Sheet: When Is It Safe for Workers with COVID-19 to Return to Work?



The light at the end of the COVID-19 tunnel is that more than 80% of victims recover and that preventive self-isolation and quarantine last only 14 days. Accordingly, there are lots of employees out there who are itching to get back to work. Assuming their operations are still up and running, the question then becomes: At what point is it safe for these employees to return to the workplace? One of the best ways to answer that question is to look at the recent guidance issued by Alberta Health Services. Although directed to health care workers, the AHS guidelines apply to any workers contemplating a return to work after a bout of COVID-19 illness, self-isolation or quarantine.

Situation 1. A worker in self-isolation for 14 days wants to return sooner after testing negative for COVID-19

Answer: The worker can't return sooner. Workers in quarantine as a result of travel or exposure to COVID-19 are legally required to self-isolate for the full 14 days.

Explanation: Contagious disease infection doesn't happen at the moment of exposure but only after an incubation period. So, testing negative doesn't prove you weren't exposed and won't eventually get infected. The incubation period for COVID-19 is 2 to 14 days from the time of exposure. And that's how long you need to stay in quarantine to avoid infecting others.

Situation 2. A worker develops symptoms while in self-isolation

Answer: The quarantine period is actually 14 days OR 14 days from the day their symptoms are gone, WHICHEVER TAKES LONGER.

Explanation: Workers may develop symptoms of COVID-19, including fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat or a runny nose, while

they're in quarantine. Symptomatic workers need to extend their quarantine beyond 14 days until their symptoms completely disappear. According to AHS, those workers must either take the online COVID-19 self-assessment or call Health Link at 811 for additional guidance.

Example: A worker exhibits COVID-19 symptoms on her first day of self-isolation. Those symptoms disappear after 4 days. The worker must remain in isolation for another 14 days and can't return to work until day 19.

Day 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19

Situation 3. A worker referred for COVID-19 testing because he has symptoms wants to return to work after the test comes back negative

Answer: A worker with a cough or other symptoms of COVID-19 are legally required to self-isolate for 10 days, even if the worker didn't travel outside Canada in the past 2 weeks or believe he was exposed. However, because he tested negative for COVID-19, he can return to work when his symptoms are completely gone.

Exception: According to AHS, a cough may last for several weeks after a person recovers from a respiratory illness but that doesn't mean he's infectious. Thus, a post-viral cough doesn't require continued self-isolation as long as there are no other symptoms of COVID-19.

Situation 4. A worker who wasn't exposed to COVID-19 and didn't travel outside Canada in the past 2 weeks feels sick; but the online COVID-19 self-assessment indicates that she doesn't need to be tested for COVID-19 testing

Answer: The worker can't return to work and must limit her contact with others until her symptoms resolve.

Explanation: People feeling ill need to stay away from work even if their illness isn't COVID-19. They should also keep monitoring for fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat or runny nose and take the COVID-19 self-assessment again and stay home if any of those symptoms develop.

Situation 5. A worker's wife is in self-isolation. Neither person has COVID-19 symptoms. Must the worker self-isolate too?

Answer: No.

Explanation: The worker can go to work unless he travelled outside Canada in the past 2 weeks or had another possible COVID-19 exposure, e.g., close contact with someone who has COVID-19 without wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

BUT if the worker's wife does get symptoms within 14 days of travel outside Canada or 14 days of being in close contact with a person confirmed to have COVID-19, the worker would also have to self-isolate for 14 days, starting from the last time he had close contact with his wife.

BUT if the worker's wife gets symptoms and *hasn't* traveled outside of Canada in the past 2 weeks or had any known exposure to COVID-19, the worker wouldn't have to self-isolate unless he develops symptoms, at which point he would have to self-isolate and either take the online COVID-19 self-assessment or call Health Link at 811 to ask for guidance.

Situation 6. A manager tells a worker who's had a nagging cough since January to stay home until the cough disappears, but the worker feels fine. Can he keep going to work?

Answer: Yes, but conditions apply.

Explanation: COVID-19 usually causes new symptoms or makes chronic symptoms much worse. According to AHS, if you have a chronic symptom like a cough that hasn't really changed much for weeks (or months), and you've seen a doctor and don't currently have an infection that you could pass onto someone else, then it's okay for you to work. It's also okay for people with a chronic cough or reactive airway disease to go back to work after they've been sick if they're still coughing, as long as it's not worse and they don't have any other symptoms, AHS adds.

Situation 7. A worker who hasn't traveled and doesn't believe she was exposed to anybody with COVID-19 decides to self-isolate after experiencing symptoms. But now she feels better but isn't tested for COVID-19. Can she return to work before the 14 days are up?

Answer: The worker should self-isolate for 10 days after his symptoms began OR until the symptoms are gone, WHICHEVER IS LONGER.

Situation 8. A worker tests positive for COVID-19. When can he return to work?

Answer: A worker who tests positive is legally required to self-isolate for 10 days after his symptoms began OR until the symptoms are gone, WHICHEVER IS LONGER. Healthcare workers are subject to additional restrictions and can't work in any health care setting until 14 days after their symptoms began and their symptoms have been resolved, whichever is longer.