



# Preventing exposure to COVID-19 Airline Cabin Crew (Flight Attendants)

June 30, 2020

## **Introduction:**

As the global pandemic of COVID-19 persists, CUPE wants to ensure that employers and members continue to implement leading practices to prevent workplace exposure to the virus which causes COVID-19.

The guidance in this document is specific to addressing the hazard related to COVID-19. It is intended to assist CUPE health and safety activists in their efforts to ensure that adequate protections are in place for members. In the case of those workplaces that have suspended operations, the guidance is intended to assist in implementing effective controls prior to the resumption of normal operations.

The information linked below helps highlight some of hazards that increase the likelihood of exposure. Find CUPE's COVID-19 resources here:

- [General Occupational Guidelines for COVID-19](#)
- [COVID-19 Fact Sheet](#)
- [COVID-19 and the Right to Refuse Unsafe Work](#)
- [COVID-19 Cleaning and Disinfecting](#)
- [COVID-19 Personal Protective Equipment](#)
- [COVID-19 and the Use of Masks and Respirators](#)
- [COVID-19 Masks and Face Coverings](#)
- [Good Hygiene Practices and the Respiratory \(Cough\) Etiquette](#)

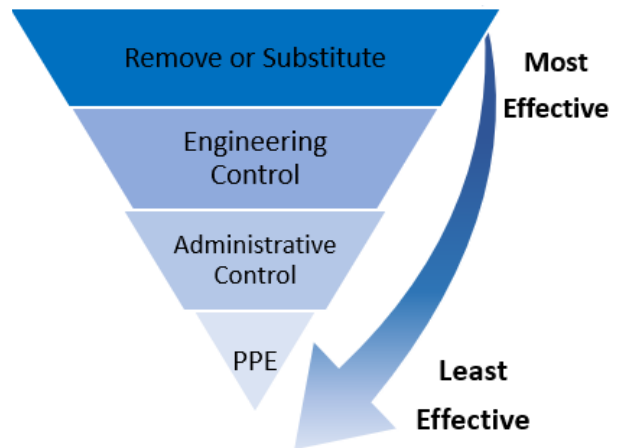
It remains vital that employers continue to work with their (joint) health and safety committee about the best way to control sector-specific hazards during this pandemic.

**This document provides specific guidance to CUPE members working as airline cabin crew.**

**General guidance can be found [HERE](#) and should be reviewed in conjunction with this document and the specific sector documents which apply to your workplace which can be found [HERE](#).**

## Hierarchy of controls

*Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) is concerned with identifying workplace hazards and implementing control measures that reduce the risk of hazards leading to illness or injury.* In the field of OH&S there is a concept called the “hierarchy of controls”. This is the broad category of controls that can be used to address hazards found in the workplace. They range from the strongest controls (eliminating the hazard) to the weakest controls (personal protective equipment PPE).



*Personal protective equipment (PPE) is not the most effective hazard control.* It is a last resort when the hazard cannot be adequately addressed using more effective controls “up” the hierarchy. Due to pervasive media coverage of PPE shortages across the world, and due to PPE’s vital role as one of many control measures that workplaces utilize, there is a common misconception that PPE is the best (or only) hazard control that can protect workers from COVID-19. This is a potentially dangerous assumption. It limits the discussion to, and consideration for, stronger control measures. CUPE members, locals and health and safety activists should be pushing for the best protections for their members. *However, unless the alternate controls completely remove the hazard of COVID-19 from the airplane, workers should also be very mindful and weary of arguments that PPE isn’t necessary due to the existence of engineering or administrative controls.*

When choosing controls, don’t forget other hazards and how they might be affected by new controls (for example, the hazard of working alone while practicing physical distancing and reduced number of people in the workplace or the PPE needed for cleaning). Also ensure that controls do not introduce new hazards into the workplace.

All the following sample hazard controls should be considered in addition to any other legislative and regulatory requirements such as policies and procedures for working alone, preventing violence, and so on.

Cabin crew have a unique and important perspective in evaluating the effectiveness of controls proposed by the employer as they understand best how these tasks are performed in practice and what impediments there may be to implement administrative controls.

Remember: control of hazards related to COVID-19 are just one part of a much larger employer health and safety program. **All the following hazard controls must be continuously monitored, evaluated, updated and revised in conjunction with your Health and Safety Committee or representative.**

## **Hazard Controls for airline cabin crew:**

### **Elimination**

All flight operators must take every precaution reasonable to eliminate the potential of a worker's exposure to COVID-19. As we've seen, the virus can be easily spread among clients, customers, contractors where adequate controls are not in place. As such, flight operators must eliminate the possibility of anyone with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 from accessing the workplace.

- Workers who are sick must remain home. Employers should have clear rules around paid self-isolation and quarantine for those who are sick with, or who have been exposed to someone who has COVID-19. These plans should include how to handle situations with infected family members or persons cohabitating with them.
- Cancel all in-person non-critical programs until further notice. This includes training for which regulators have provided extensions, such as first aid recertification.
- Conduct programs and meetings using a shared communications program (Facetime/Skype/Zoom). See further guidance on meetings below.
- Reduce the use of paper that will be handled by multiple workers using electronic documents.
- Passenger screening utilizing multiple methods at check-in and before aircraft boarding should be utilized to prevent symptomatic passengers from accessing the aircraft (note: transmission can occur even if infected passengers are not showing symptoms)

### **Engineering controls**

This category of controls involves using barriers or separations to prevent employees from being exposed to hazards. For example, plexiglass barriers and other hard or soft material (including vinyl) surfaces have become a common application during the COVID-19 pandemic, installed at points of contact with clients, customers, contractors or other staff or when two metres (six feet) of distance cannot be maintained in all directions.

Wherever possible, it is better to create permanent or semi-permanent barriers before utilizing administrative controls or PPE. For example, many of us have become accustomed to seeing plexiglass barriers for cashiers at the grocery store that separates them from the customers.

While semi-permanent alterations may not be possible on a plane, there may be opportunities for engineered controls in crew rooms, check in desks and other areas where physical distancing may be a challenge and where cabin crew need to go during their shift.

Flight operators should implement the following engineering controls:

- Ventilation systems can play an important role in preventing the spread of infections though the utilization of filters that catch the majority of particles and adjusting the system to mix in more fresh air. Ensure that ventilation systems are operating as

designed. On planes, this means that the main ventilation systems should be running prior to boarding, and that preferably both air packs should be operational and in use. In office and classroom environments HVAC systems should be fitted with filters having the highest MERV rating, or preferably HEPA.

- The furniture layout of crew rooms workplaces should be used to promote physical distancing such as removing chairs around tables to promote a minimum of two metres (six feet) distance between others for seating and to the greatest extent possible the elimination of stations where employees face one-another.
- Visual markers (such as tape on the ground and signage) should be used to help promote physical distancing throughout the facility.
- Distribute disinfecting and sanitization materials so that they are available to the workers at point of use for all work sites.
- Provide workers and passengers with tissues and lined garbage bins. “No touch” garbage cans with a foot pedal (for example) should be used when feasible.
- Determine new limits for the number of people permitted to enter each building, room and aircraft to ensure people are able to maintain safe distancing of two metres (six feet) in all directions.

#### **Vehicle use**

- When being transported for work, follow these measures:
  - use appropriate respiratory PPE [see fact sheets listed above];
  - for large passenger vehicles (vans/buses etc.) ensure maximum distancing by staggering riders with one seat between them;
  - reduce the number of workers per trip and increase the overall number of trips needed to transport workers to a worksite, if necessary; and
  - provide disinfection and sanitization products to clean vehicles between driver and passenger changes.

#### **Hotel during layover**

- Crews required to stay overnight at destination should be housed in hotels with confirmed COVID-19 infection control plans.
- A reduced-price menu for room delivery of food should be provided to ensure that cabin crew don't need to leave the hotel.
- Additional masks and alcohol-based disinfectant (at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol) should be provided for use during layover.
- Where crew members are required to share hotel suites during layover:
  - reduce the number of individuals per suite and increase the overall number of rooms needed to house cabin crew.
  - provide disinfection and sanitization products to clean items in the suite.
  - ensure that the suite has the capacity to maintain two metres (six feet) of distance between occupants.

- If there are multiple layovers where staff must share accommodations, ensure that the same staff share suites (avoid mixing to reduce the potential of exposure between staff).

## **Administrative Controls**

Administrative controls are workplace rules that control or alter the way the work is done. These may include things like the timing of work, policies and work practices such as standards and operating procedures.

Flight operators should implement the following additional administrative controls:

### **General**

- Employers must develop a comprehensive Exposure Control Plan, including ongoing hazard assessments (more than one may be required as circumstances, hazards and risks change) and how the employer will respond when anyone is confirmed or contact with cases of COVID or after having travelled internationally.
- If in-person meetings must happen, limit meetings and hold meetings outside or in a large space to allow for physical distancing of at least two metres (six feet) between people and ample airflow.
- Food must always be protected from contamination. This may include ensuring guards or coverings for food, and utensils. Shared items should be avoided. For example, individual milk creamers instead of milk cartons, individual water bottles instead of water jugs and cups.
- As much as possible, practice physical distancing between coworkers.
- Employers must have written COVID-19 policies, standard operating procedures and training programs for all classifications as part of their overall occupational health and safety information programs. As many policies have been created in a reactive manner, this may require reviewing and amalgamating many individual bulletins into one cohesive document.
- Develop a method of clear and effective communication to workers because of how quickly information is changing. Workers need to *know what to do* in response to the changing working conditions. Having one “COVID” document to refer to and update may make this task much easier to manage.
- Update the Pandemic Plan, in consultation with the health and safety committee as often as necessary to protect workers.
- On board services should be reduced to limit contact with passengers.
- All passengers must be required to wear facial coverings that meet the requirements of public health authorities (when tolerated)

### **Limiting movement of staff and equipment**

- Reduce staff movements between rooms (airports/training centres), cabins (onboard) and other sections of the workplace.
- Avoid sharing equipment between rooms (airports/training centres), cabins (onboard) and with other staff. If equipment sharing is unavoidable, ensure the equipment is disinfected before and after every use.

### **Physical Distancing**

- Where workers cannot maintain physical distancing of at least two metres (six feet) between persons, measures to reduce exposure time must be implemented including service changes/reductions. This may involve reducing the number of times cabin crew need to enter the main cabin area at all.
- If distancing can not be maintained for takeoff and landing due to jumpseat configuration, some cabin crew should be relocated to a row of reserved passenger seating.
- Discuss with crews how to perform work safely while maintaining distance to the greatest extent possible and while sharing tools as little as possible. Modify on board duties where necessary.
- Within the airport, employers should designate and affix signage indicating single direction travel paths for worksites and stairwells for workers and the public. This may require the airline to work with airport authorities.
- If workers must work in close proximity, explore the feasibility (keeping in mind collective agreement requirements) of keeping them on the same team from day to day and avoid mixing to reduce the potential of exposure between work teams.
- Eliminate onboard transactions requiring the handling of cash and/or customer payment cards. This would require implementing pre-purchase methods if/when items become available for sale onboard.
- Limit unnecessary on-site contact between workers and between workers and outside service providers.
- Avoid close greetings like hugs or handshakes and promote good cough/sneeze and hand hygiene practices etc.

### **Cleaning and Disinfecting**

- Employers should have a procedure and supplies for hand hygiene (and other exposed areas) that provide people the ability to wash for at least 20 seconds with soap and water.
- When washing with soap is not possible, workers should be supplied with a sanitizing liquid (at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol disinfectant).
- The employer should ensure enhanced disinfecting of surfaces, particularly “high touch” surfaces and equipment. This should be worked into the carrier’s cleaning procedures/program.

- There should be a particular disinfection program to deal with any confirmed cases of COVID-19 including what surfaces are to be cleaned, when, how often, with what disinfectants and by whom. This should include personal protective equipment as required by the Exposure Control Program and Hazard Assessment (see PPE section below).
- The employer must establish a tracking system of when the cleaning tasks were completed.
- While working, cleaning staff should close off the area to other people. To facilitate this, carriers should amend procedures so as not to require cabin crew to be onboard while cleaners perform their duties.
- Place posters that encourage hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette at the entrance to the workplace and in other areas where they will be seen; graphics will be more useful than words and transcend language barriers.
- Use damp cleaning methods such as damp clean cloths, and/or a wet mop. Do not dust or sweep which can distribute virus droplets (fomites) into the air. Tools should be dampened with a solution confirmed to cleaning and disinfection from COVID-19.
- Airlines must provide appropriate time for cleaning and disinfection between turns.
- It is important that when employers require workers to use hazardous products, that workers are trained ([See CUPE's WHMIS Sheet](#)).

### **Waste Management**

- Have an appropriate waste management system to handle potential and contaminated waste (like used PPE) and ensure that workers onboard and on the ground know what those processes are.
- Contaminated items used by a person diagnosed or suspected to have COVID-19 should be placed in a plastic bag before disposing of it with other waste (double bagged). Carriers should look at ways to designate contaminated waste such as coloured bags, tags etc.
- Wash hands appropriately with soap and water after handling contaminated items (even if gloves were used).
- Contaminated disposable cleaning items such as mop heads, cloths, etc. should be placed in a lined garbage bin before disposing of these items with regular waste via double bagging the items within a main garbage bag. Reusable cleaning items can be washed using regular laundry soap and hot water (60-90°C).

### **Personal Protective Equipment**

PPE is worn by individuals to reduce exposure when in close contact to suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19. Though a last resort, if PPE plays a vital role in mitigating hazards in the workplace when combined with engineering and administrative practices. This is particularly the case in unique and challenging work environments like those frequented by cabin crew.

When PPE is required to be worn, workers should be mindful of the following:

- If physical distancing cannot be maintained, workers should be provided, at a minimum, an appropriate supply of disposable surgical masks and eye protection that take into account the length of the employee's shift and days away from home base. A fit-tested N-95 respirator (or greater) is preferable.
- The equipment should be properly fitted, including respirator fit testing as necessary.
- Provide disposable gloves for specific tasks that put cabin crew in contact with passengers or items used by passengers (e.x. garbage pickup).
- The Employer must provide appropriate training about when PPE must be worn, how it must be put on and taken off and disposed of, and what its limitations are.
- Determine usage rates of PPE and ensure that there are enough PPE supplies so that workers are not required to share (this applies to either COVID-19-related PPE or regular PPE required to perform duties safely).
- If appropriate PPE cannot be worn or are not available, the worker should be reassigned to another work area without loss of pay or benefits as a result. Workers have the right to refuse unsafe work [see fact sheet above].
- All PPE should be assessed for worker allergies or reactions to the PPE materials. If the worker is unable to wear the personal protective equipment, and hypoallergenic alternatives are not available, the worker should be reassigned to another work area.
- All PPE should be regularly inspected for defects or damage.
- Provide every staff with hand sanitizers at their working stations or in their office space.
- Implement mandatory respiratory protection policies in all workplaces.
- Note: Cloth facemasks are not regulated and do not comprise PPE. They may be of use to cabin crew for areas outside the workplace (layovers etc.) but are not appropriate for use at work – particularly onboard aircraft.

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