

Updates on COVID-19 and healthcare workers: Avoid stress and exhaustion!

Info Sheet #4 – April 21, 2020 - from Physicians Occupational Safety and Health (POSH)

Healthcare workers (HCWs) are working in unprecedented times. More than a third of HCWs responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in China during its peak suffered from insomnia, with staff reporting sleeplessness also more likely to feel depressed, anxious, and have stress-based trauma¹.

Stress, burnout, exhaustion, fear and anxiety, the likes of which most have never known, impact all essential workers in healthcare. It is extremely important during this time that HCWs, *including physicians* look after themselves. Long work hours increase the risk for reduced performance on the job, as well as a wide range of chronic diseases.² In addition, fatigue-related errors could harm patients. One study found that there is an increased risk of injury and illness with increased shift duration³. The effect was statistically significant for 12-hour shifts compared to less than 12-hour shifts and the greatest risk was observed for 24-hour shifts; shift length had a linear relationship with occupational injury and illness⁴. Research of 11,516 nurses concluded that working more than 40 hours per week on average was significantly associated with work-related injuries³.

POSH surveyed almost 3,000 physicians in VCH as part of our monitoring of occupational exposures to ascertain how well our physicians are able to practice proper procedures - to help determine further needs for PPE, training, fit-testing or other guidance at individual, departmental or regional levels. Excluding those who had had direct contact with COVID cases while wearing appropriate PPE, 76 of the 644 (11.8%) of the physicians who completed the assessment reported having a possibly inadequately protected exposure to a COVID case at work; from our review, 48 were indeed high-risk exposures. Most (61.8%), however, were from the potential exposure prior to March 25, which was when clear communication was widely dissemination regarding the need to wear PPE (masks, eye protection and gloves) in all direct patient interactions. Fortunately, only a very small number of VCH physicians tested positive for COVID-19, and we know of very few breaches of PPE protocols since March 25th.

Of concern, however, was that 5% (31) of VCH physicians who responded, reported *working while exhausted very often*, and 16% (107) reported *often* continue working despite being exhausted, with another 57% (367) sometimes *continue working if they have to while exhausted*. The numbers were even higher amongst physicians who work directly with COVID patients: exhaustion very often (9%); and often continue to work while exhausted (19%). Also, a full 55.6% (20/36) of the physicians who worked with COVID+ patients and answered that they worked exhausted *very often* or *often* reported having had a possible unprotected exposure to COVID at work (mostly before March 25th).

When on a flight, you are reminded to put your own oxygen masks on first before helping another passenger. In the same spirit, we at POSH wish to remind you: **be kind to yourself!**

If you have a confidential question about your concerns, your exposures, your health, etc., **please don't hesitate to contact us at posh.covid@ubc.ca** . POSH operates 8 am to 8 pm, Monday to Saturday and we will get back to you as soon as possible.

Thanks for you dedicated work. Stay safe!

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3. Weaver MD, Patterson PD, Fabio A, Moore C, Freiberg MS, Songer TJ. An observational study of shift length, crew familiarity, and occupational injury and illness in emergency medical services workers *Occup Environ Med* 2015; **72**.
4. Olds DM, Clarke SP. The effect of work hours on adverse events and errors in health care. *Journal of safety research* 2010; **41**(2): 153-62.