



FAQs Regarding COVID-19

Question 1. I am in the healthcare industry and/or I am an employee of another business in North Carolina where I am in direct contact with individuals that have been confirmed as COVID-19 positive. My employer is not providing me or my co-workers with appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) such as respirators, gloves, etc. Can I file a complaint with NCDOL/OSH?

Answer 1. Yes, you may file a complaint with the NCDOL OSH Division. Employers are required to provide their employees a workplace free from recognized serious safety/health hazards. Exposure to individuals that are COVID-19 positive is a recognized serious health hazard. Employees in direct contact with such individuals must be provided appropriate PPE, training, and fit testing if they will be required to wear a respirator. Contact the OSH Complaint Desk by phone at 919-779-8560 or 1-800-625-2267 (1-800-NC LABOR) (in-state only), or through the [online form](#) on our website.

Question 2. Where can I find information and guidance associated with COVID-19?

Answer 2. There are multiple sources for COVID-19 guidance documents. For occupational safety and health guidance, information can be found on the following websites:

- [NCDOL/OSH Division](#) (enforcement guidance, hazard alerts, industry guides and other government agency resources)
- [N.C. State Government Response](#)
- [U.S. Government Guidance](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\) Guidance](#)

Question 3. If one of my co-workers at the jobsite tests COVID-19 positive, does my employer need to tell me?

Answer 3. If a vendor or co-worker at a jobsite tests positive and they were in direct contact with other individuals at a jobsite within the past 14 days, the employer should notify all affected employees while maintaining confidentiality. The employer should also sanitize the jobsite and contact the local health department. Potentially exposed employees should contact their medical provider for quarantine guidance or if they are exhibiting symptoms.

[Executive Order \(EO\) No. 138](#) also requires certain businesses to send home sick employees. This EO places mandatory requirements that sick employees at long term care (LTC) facilities with skilled



nursing staff and retail establishments must ensure sick employees are sent home and they stay home until no longer infectious. All other types of businesses are also encouraged to do likewise. The provisions in EO No. 138 can be enforced by local and state law enforcement.

In addition, the CDC and other government agencies are encouraging all employers to send employees home if they are sick and/or exhibiting signs of COVID-19. Although there is not a specific OSHA standard that covers COVID-19 exposures, if an employee tests positive for COVID-19 then they have a known serious health hazard. Therefore, if an employer is aware that an employee at their worksite is COVID-19 positive, the employer has a general duty to separate the COVID-19 positive employee from other employees, preferably by having them stay home. If an employer does not do so, they could be cited under the OSH general duty clause for failure to provide a safe and healthful workplace free from recognized hazards.

Question 4. If an employee of a business tests COVID-19 positive, are they required to notify customers?

Answer 4. Businesses, such as grocery stores, are not required to notify the public or close for extra cleaning if one of their employees tests positive.

The business should inform the employee's coworkers about possible exposure but maintain confidentiality. Businesses should also contact their local health departments and the CDC for further protocols, including sanitization guidance.

Question 5. What are the workplace requirements for face coverings used as protection against COVID-19?

Answer 5. The Governor's [June 24, 2020, EO No. 147](#), requires a face covering be worn by most people statewide when in public and in working environments. The face covering provisions of the EO are not enforced by OSH but can be enforced by state and local law enforcement.

Voluntary use of face coverings does not require an employer to comply with the requirements of OSHA respiratory protection standards (29 CFR 1910.134).

Employers can also allow employees to voluntarily use N95 respirators, in accordance with 1910.134(c)(2), if they provide information in Appendix D of the OSHA 1910.134 respiratory standard.



Question 6. I recently read an article on social media indicating that wearing a face mask could put you at risk of breathing air that is oxygen-deficient. OSHA requires employers to provide employees with air that is at least 19.5 % oxygen. Does this mean that I can refuse to wear a face mask while at work?

Answer 6. Cloth face coverings are not considered a respirator or PPE and are not covered by any OSHA standard. Their purpose is to control the spread of infection by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the virus that causes COVID-19. Face coverings are primarily designed to protect those around the wearer from exposure to droplets the wearer may expel from the mouth or nose when sneezing, coughing, or even talking. This is especially important because people can spread the virus when they don't feel sick.

A face covering, like a surgical mask, pulls air through the fabric into the worker's lungs when they inhale through the nose and mouth. There is no scientific evidence that a cloth face covering would restrict oxygen levels in the breathing air.

The governor's [June 24, 2020, EO No. 147](#), requires a face covering be worn by most people statewide when in public and in working environments. The face covering provisions of the EO are not enforced by the state OSH Division, but can be enforced by state and local law enforcement.

Question 7. Can my employer require me to wear a face covering while working outdoors in hot, humid conditions?

Answer 7. Yes, your employer can require you to wear a face covering to control the spread of COVID-19 while working outside under conditions of high temperatures and humidity.

The requirement to wear a face covering in public for protection against COVID-19, especially when social distancing is not possible, includes while at work. This mandate, which can be found in the governor's [June 24, 2020, EO No. 147](#), does contain several exceptions. Please note that the requirements of this or any other EO are not enforced by the state OSH Division, but can be enforced by state and local law enforcement.

Employers are required by the OSH general duty clause to provide employees with working conditions that are free from recognized hazards, such as heat stress, that can cause serious physical harm or death. This means that employers would be expected to have a heat stress management program in place, which could include employee training, regular water breaks, allowing employees to take rests in shaded areas where they can social distance and remove masks to help cool down. Employees may need to take more frequent breaks to cool off and drink water than they would if face coverings were not required.

Additional information on heat stress programs can be found on the NCDOL Safety and Health Topic page on [Heat Stress](#).



Question 8. If I am required to wear a face covering while working indoors in hot, humid conditions, does my employer have to provide air conditioning?

Answer 8. No, employers are not obligated to maintain the workplace within any temperature range. Therefore, your employer is not required to provide air conditioning during summer months even though you must wear a face covering while at work.

The requirement to wear a face covering in public for protection against COVID-19, especially when social distancing is not possible, includes while at work. This mandate, which can be found in the governor's [June 24, 2020, EO No. 147](#), does contain several exceptions. Please note that the requirements of this or any other EO are not enforced by the state OSH Division, but can be enforced by state and local law enforcement.

Employers are required by the OSH general duty clause to provide employees with working conditions that are free from recognized hazards, such as heat stress, that can cause serious physical harm or death. This means that employers would be expected to have a heat stress management program in place, which could include employee training, regular water breaks, allowing employees to take rests in cooler areas. Employees may need to take more frequent breaks to cool off and drink water than they would if face coverings were not required.

Additional information on heat stress programs can be found on the NCDOL Safety and Health Topic page on [Heat Stress](#).

Question 9. My employer and/or a business is not following the face covering requirements, 6-foot distance recommendation for social distancing, the maximum number of individuals for a gathering and/or other guidance addressed in state and local emergency orders such as N.C. Executive Orders. Does NCDOL enforce these requirements?

Answer 9. No. [Executive orders](#) and other local orders are enforced by state and local law enforcement.

Question 10. My employer and/or a business is not complying with CDC guidelines (i.e. social distancing, facemasks, etc). Does NCDOL or OSH enforce these requirements?

Answer 10. No. CDC guidelines are not enforceable by NCDOL or OSH. However, if an employee is being exposed to a safety or health hazard in the workplace that is likely to cause death or serious physical harm, the employer is required to address it. If the employer does not adequately address serious hazards, an employee or their representative can file a complaint with the NCDOL OSH Division (see Q/A No. 1 for information regarding the filing of a complaint with OSH).



Question 11. My employer is keeping their business open against the executive order. Can I file an OSH complaint and request the NCDOL OSH Division shut the business down?

Answer 11. No. Executive orders and local orders are enforced by state and local law enforcement.

Question 12. My employer shut down the business due to the COVID-19 pandemic and executive orders and I am now out of work and not receiving a paycheck. Who do I contact about unemployment benefits?

Answer 12. For all unemployment benefits, please visit the [N.C. Department of Commerce website](#).

Question 13. Who do I contact for workers' compensation related questions associated with COVID-19?

Answer 13. If it was determined that an employee's COVID-19 infection was related to work exposures, the employer/employee should contact the [N.C. Industrial Commission](#) with any workers' compensation related questions.

Question 14. What practices should employers/employees in different types of businesses be following to reduce potential exposures to COVID-19?

Answer 14. Some workplace requirements and recommendations can be found in the current [executive orders](#) or on the [N.C. Department of Health and Human Services webpage](#). The NCDOL OSH Division and Federal OSHA have created a number of COVID-19 related guidance documents and hazard alerts, for employers/employees engaged in businesses such as: healthcare, food processing, emergency response, postmortem care, laboratories, airline operations, retail establishments (including grocery stores), solid waste, travel, correctional facilities and migrant farm work. The guidance documents can be found on the following websites:

- [NCDOL/OSH Division](#)
- [OSHA](#)

As additional informational materials are created, they will be placed on existing websites.



Question 15. I am afraid to go to work because of possible exposure to COVID-19. My employer is not providing facemasks, gloves, and/or enforcing social distancing. I expressed my safety concerns and my employer told me that if I did not come to work tomorrow, I will be fired. Is this legal and do I have any protections?

Answer 15. North Carolina is an “at will” state, which means an employer can terminate an employee for any reason and/or no reason at all, unless they are in violation of an employee’s rights under existing state or federal discrimination laws. Therefore, whether an employer could fire an employee in the scenario described in the questions would likely depend on whether an employee was being exposed to a serious safety or health hazard or would likely be exposed to a serious safety or health hazard.

If there is a serious workplace hazard, the employer is required to provide each employee with a safe and healthful workplace, free from recognized serious hazards. If the employer is not doing so and an employee brings that to the employer’s attention and is subsequently fired or other retaliatory action is taken, the employee could file a retaliation complaint with NCDOL’s Retaliatory Employment Discrimination Bureau (REDB) of the NCDOL under the state’s Retaliatory Employment Discrimination Act (REDA).

An employee must file the complaint in writing with the REDB of NCDOL. Employees can call 1- 800-625-2267 (1-800-NC LABOR) to discuss their concerns and request an REDB complaint form. When an employee receives the complaint form, they should follow the enclosed instructions and return the form to the REDB office. All filed complaints are investigated.

If the employee has further questions, they can contact REDB by email at ask.edb@labor.nc.gov or call 1- 800-625-2267 (1-800-NC LABOR). Additional information about retaliatory employment discrimination under REDA and how to file a complaint can be found on [NCDOL’s website](#).

Question 16. I am an employer/employee in the healthcare industry. Does the NCDOL OSH Division have any guidance available regarding selection, use and fit testing associated with N95 respirators regarding exposures/potential exposures to COVID-19?

Answer 16. Yes, see current OSH Division guidance documents on [NCDOL’s COVID-19 website](#).

Question 17. I am an employer/employee in a business other than healthcare that uses N95 respirators. Does the OSH Division have any guidance available regarding selection, use and fit testing associated with N95 respirators regarding exposures/potential exposures to COVID- 19?

Answer 17. Yes, see OSH Division guidance documents on [NCDOL’s COVID-19 website](#).



Question 18. Are employers supposed to record workplace illnesses associated with COVID-19 on their OSHA 300 logs in accordance with 29 CFR Part 1904?

Answer 18. On April 10, 2020, OSHA issued an enforcement memorandum that provides interim guidance to their Compliance Safety and Health Officers (CSHOs) for enforcing the requirements of 29 CFR Part 1904 with respect to the recording of occupational illnesses, specifically cases of COVID-19. The NCDOL OSH Division adopted this memo on April 13, 2020.

N.C. employers of workers in the healthcare industry, emergency response organizations (e.g., emergency medical, firefighting, and law enforcement services), and correctional institutions must continue to make work-relatedness determinations pursuant to 29 CFR 1904. Until further notice, however, OSHA will not enforce 29 CFR 1904 to require other employers to make the same work-relatedness determinations, except where:

1. There is objective evidence that a COVID-19 case may be work-related. This could include, for example, a number of cases developing among workers who work closely together without an alternative explanation; and
2. The evidence was reasonably available to the employer. For purposes of this memorandum, examples of reasonably available evidence include information given to the employer by employees, as well as information that an employer learns regarding its employees' health and safety in the ordinary course of managing its business and employees.

The associated N.C. and Federal memos can be viewed on [NCDOL's COVID-19 website](#).

Question 19. If an employee lives with a family member that is considered high risk for serious health effects if exposed to COVID-19, is there any option for an employee to get paid leave if their employer has less than 500 employees? How long is the leave, if so?

Answer 19. This situation described might fall under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which is administered through the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL), Wage and Hour Division (WHD). The USDOL WHD has offices in Raleigh and Charlotte and can be reached using the following contact information:

Raleigh District Office

U.S. Department of Labor
Wage and Hour Division
Somerset Bank Building
4407 Bland Road, Suite 260
Raleigh, NC 27609
(919) 790-2741
1-866-4-USWAGE
(1-866-487-9243)

Charlotte Area Office

U.S. Department of Labor
Wage and Hour Division
3800 Arco Corporate Drive
Suite 460
Charlotte, NC 28273
(704)-749-3360
1-866-4-USWAGE
1-866-487-9243



Question 20. My employer is requiring all employees to report back to work. I am not sure it is safe for me and others to go back. What types of PPE, face coverings, guarding and supplies is my employer required to provide to ensure returning employees are not exposed to COVID-19?

Answer 20. Every employer is required to provide a workplace free from recognized hazards that are likely to cause death, serious injury or serious physical harm. The CDC, OSHA and OSH have each prepared guidance for employers and employees to limit potential COVID-19 exposures in the workplace. The types of PPE and other measures required or recommended, depends on the specific types of industries and risks level posed to employees in those industries. Guidance documents can be found on CDC, OSHA and NCDOL OSH websites.

This document was revised on July 17, 2020 and may be subject to change.