

BC Dairy Producer COVID-19 Update: What farmers need to know

The following is a BC Dairy Association Q&A for dealing with a positive case on the farm, as of March 23. This document links to authorities' web pages is subject to change as the Canadian government updates its information and advice.

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A few quick definitions:

Social distancing means keeping a safe distance (approximately 2 metres) from others and avoiding gathering spaces. Use the phone or other technology to connect with others.

Quarantine involves avoiding contact with others if a person has been exposed to COVID-19 to see if they become ill.

Isolation involves separating an individual who has contracted COVID-19 to prevent them from spreading it to others.

1. What are the symptoms I should watch for in myself or my employees?

[PHAC says those who are infected](#) with COVID-19 may have little to no symptoms. You may not know you have symptoms of COVID-19 because they are similar to a cold or flu.

Symptoms may take up to 14 days to appear after exposure to COVID-19. It is not known at this point if the virus can be transmitted to others if someone is not showing symptoms. While experts believe that it is possible, it is considered less common.

Symptoms include:

- fever
- cough
- difficulty breathing
- pneumonia in both lungs

2. I'm a farmer and I have symptoms. What do I do now?

[PHAC says](#) that if you are showing symptoms of COVID-19, reduce your contact with others:

- **Isolate** yourself within your home for 14 days to avoid spreading it to others.
 - Stay in a separate room from others or keep a 2-metre distance.
- Call your local public health authority to tell them your symptoms and follow their instructions for testing. The BC government released a symptom self-assessment tool. It can be found [here](#).

3. I have symptoms but have to go to the barn and take care of animals.

First, take care of yourself and stay in a room separate from the rest of your family. If you are normally in close contact with elderly people, take extra precaution to stay away from them. Call your local public health authorities to be tested, and stay isolated while you rest and recover.

If you have not yet planned for alternative workers to assist you, do so now. *If and when* you or your farm worker need to continue providing care for animals, stay away from other humans. [PHAC recommends](#) you **wear a face mask and wash your hands** to reduce the chance of spreading the virus to other people. Also wear gloves to avoid contaminating surfaces. Exercise proper social distancing.

4. How can I slow the spread of COVID-19, if the virus is on my farm?

Farmers have two main responsibilities in this case: protecting people and ensuring cleanliness. Below are recommendations to enhance cleanliness at the barn to minimize risks:

1. Practice recommended good hygiene (hand washing, sneezing in elbow, etc.)
2. Disinfect surfaces regularly, especially the high-touch surfaces.
3. **Clean high-touch surfaces** with regular household cleaners or diluted bleach (1 part bleach to 9 parts water). In the barn and milk house, focus on these surfaces: door handles, taps, hoses, bulk tank openings and valves, milking equipment, etc. Ensure you clean these surfaces before and after visits of milk truck drivers, veterinarians, and other service providers.

4. Require farm workers to wear gloves at all times, as is best practice when milking or handling milking equipment.
5. Clean often any bathroom, lunchroom, office or other place you share with staff. Ensure there is adequate soap!
6. Practice social distancing with farm advisors and drivers.
 - o Let drivers do their job independently and avoid unnecessary social contact.
 - o Ensure that drivers have access to bulk tanks and feed bins.
 - o Have clear signage on farms, including your phone number, to help assist new drivers.
 - o Provide guidance or ask for advice over the phone.
 - o Maintain the recommended 2-metre distance if you must talk with them.

a. What are my responsibilities as the employer?

All employers are advised to instruct anyone exhibiting any signs or symptoms of illness to immediately go home and stay home while sick, and exclude them from all work activities.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) created posters to share recommendations within your business, on cleaning surfaces, on caring for someone who is positive at home, and more: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/awareness-resources.html>

b. As the farmer and employer, who do I need to inform?

If an employee is confirmed to have COVID-19, employees must inform their manager. Employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace but maintain confidentiality (if possible). If your employees are unable to work as a result of COVID-19, you will need to provide a record of employment. Sick employees should follow the CDC's [What to do if you are sick with coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#). Employers should consult with the local health authorities for additional guidance. You are not legally obliged to tell the marketing board, the milk transporter or processor.

c. I have an on-farm processing business. If a worker on my farm has tested positive for COVID-19, [should I close the facility?](#) If so, for how long?

The Canadian authorities are examining this question, and we will update you as soon as possible. However, do note that food facilities need to follow protocols set by local public health inspection services – municipal, provincial or national. Their recommendations may vary depending on the amount of community spread of COVID-19 in a given area. These decisions will be based on public health risk of person-to-person transmission – not based on food safety.

d. How long can the virus last on different surfaces in the barn?

The National Institutes of Health, CDC, UCLA and Princeton University scientists published a paper in [The New England Journal of Medicine](#). The scientists found the virus was **detectable** in aerosols for up to three hours, up to four hours on copper, up to 24 hours on cardboard and **up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel**. This speaks to the stability of the virus that causes COVID-19 disease, and suggests people *may* acquire the virus through the air and after touching contaminated objects. [If you think a surface may be infected](#), clean it with simple disinfectant to kill the virus and protect yourself and others. Clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Avoid touching your eyes, mouth, or nose. **Public Health authorities still say it is not the most likely cause of the disease, but both social distancing and regular cleaning of surfaces are important practices.**

5. Where can I get help on how to deal with mental health effects of isolation?

It is important to acknowledge that social distancing can take a toll on your mental health. Check out [Do More Ag](#) for resources, tips and to reach out to people who understand farmers. The American Psychological Association also has created a useful page of [suggestions for minimizing the impact of social isolation](#).

6. Will my milk still be picked up?

In short, yes. There is currently no evidence that food is a likely source or route of transmission of COVID-19. Moreover, the food industry has high food safety at every step. The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person. This includes between people who are in close contact with one another, and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

Public Health authorities in Canada and around the world continue to monitor the possibility of a person getting COVID-19 by *touching a surface* or object that has the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. At the current time, this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads¹.

Therefore, follow the enhanced cleaning and biosecurity measures recommended above, and practice all public health and social distancing measures to keep the milk supply delivery to market.

7. Should I worry about my animals as a vector of transmission for the virus in Canada?

[Canadian authorities say](#) there is currently no evidence to suggest that this virus is circulating in animals in Canada. It is possible that some types of animals can be infected with COVID-19 but there is no evidence that pets or other animals can spread the virus. There are still many unknowns about COVID-19 and this is an area that remains to be studied and understood.

Until we know more, if you have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and have a pet or other animal:

- avoid close contact with them

¹¹ FDA advice to [food industry](#)

- wear a mask
- do not snuggle or kiss them, or let them lick you, sit on your lap, or sleep in your bed
- avoid coughing and sneezing on your animals
- have someone else care for your animals
- if this is not possible, wear gloves or always wash your hands before touching or feeding them

To date, there have not been any reports of livestock being infected by COVID-19 anywhere. However, livestock producers should follow normal biosecurity measures as always. This includes limiting visitors or workers who may have travelled to, or been in contact with, someone from an affected area.

8. Will I be able to access assistance for economic losses?

The federal government has announced an [economic response plan](#) to help those who will be most impacted by this outbreak. Farmers can access the Prime Minister's statement on agricultural assistance, released on March 23, 2020, by clicking the link below:

<https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/03/23/prime-minister-announces-support-farmers-and-agri-food-businesses>

In addition, the BC Government released its COVID-19 action plan to support businesses. More details can be found here:

<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020PREM0013-000545>