

CROSH COVID Health and Safety Policy

Rationale:

Reflected in Statistics Canada's 2022 report (the last year we currently have published data) **COVID is the third leading cause of death in Canada** (Statistics Canada, 2024). Given that evidence now suggests that COVID infections contribute to heart disease/stroke (Eberhardt et al., 2023) and cancer (Jahankhani et al., 2023) (the other two leading causes of morbidity in Canada) health regulators believe that this disease will continue to contribute to widespread mortality for years to come.

COVID 19 infection is not a mild illness. Infection can cause damage to multiple organ systems (Stone et al., 2023; Taquet et al., 2021; Wadman et al., 2020), even if the acute illness does not seem severe. **In Canada, 1 in 9 people reported experiencing long-lasting symptoms (Long COVID) after infection with COVID and after three infections, more than 1 in 3 people reported experiencing the same** (Kuang et al., 2023). Long COVID causes persistent, long-term symptoms and disability in people of any age, and onset does not relate to the severity of the acute infection (Rayner & Campbell, 2021). Symptoms include severe fatigue, cognitive damage, breathing difficulties, and organ damage. Additionally, **many individuals who experience Long COVID symptoms have not seen improvement in their symptoms over time** (Kuang et al., 2023). **Currently, there is no cure for Long COVID, the ONLY method of prevention is to not get infected** (Ducharme, 2022).

In addition to Long COVID, **people have reported developing/exacerbating secondary illnesses after infection; such as autoimmune diseases, asthma, heart disease and diabetes**, (Bull-Otterson et al., 2022; Chang et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024; Stone et al., 2023), **which also impacts their long-term health and abilities.**

Due to these health outcomes, COVID infection is having, and will continue to have, long-term effects on workplaces, including, but not limited to: impacting productivity, absenteeism, and workplace stress and overall mental health, due to worker shortages. **As of June 2023, more than 1 in 5 individuals with Long COVID symptoms were absent from work or school, for a total of 14.5 million missed days** (Kuang et al., 2023). In fact, **the spread of COVID has been described as the biggest mass-disabling event in history** (Ducharme, 2022).

As such, CROSH recognizes that COVID is a labour issue. Many jobs require face-to-face contact with others, with limited opportunity for paid time-off for illness. These workers become infected repeatedly, increasing their risks of the health hazards described above. CROSH employs workers on a contractual basis based on Ministry funding, therefore our employees may be considered less protected than others at the University. Furthermore, the students working in our labs have even less financial and insured protection against long-term illness. In addition, we acknowledge the related **ongoing equity impacts of COVID; that is: knowing that the risk of COVID infection is worse for some groups, compared to others** (Barreto & Karasik, 2024). Immunocompromised people, including people on immunosuppressive medications to treat autoimmune disease, arthritis, inflammatory conditions, Crohn's disease, cancer treatment, and many others who experience systematic oppression, including racism, ableism, homophobia,

transphobia, and sexism are at increased risk for infections with more serious outcomes (Barreto & Karasik, 2024). The CROSH mission statement underscores our belief in fostering a work environment that promotes equity, diversity and inclusion and as such, a comprehensive COVID policy is in line with our understanding of disability justice.

Policy:

COVID is an airborne virus, **and wearing masks and respirators significantly reduces the viral load in exhaled breath** (Lai et al., 2024). As such we have developed a policy to protect ourselves, our colleagues, and our students.

- 1) We require that medical-grade masks be worn by anyone who is medically able to do so at our in-person events to prevent the spread of virus in the air.
- 2) We require anyone, who has cold or flu-like symptoms, to stay home and attend virtually; even if those symptoms are minor and a COVID rapid test is negative.
- 3) We require people to sign in and out of our laboratory space, to enable contact-tracing with anyone who may have been exposed to an infectious person.

If you have any questions or concerns about this policy – please contact Dr. Sandra Dorman, CROSH Director at sdorman@laurentian.ca

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