

COVID-19 Q & A

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to spread, it's important that your advisors, clients and their plan members have the most up-to-date information. Below are responses to some of the most common questions we have received related to COVID-19. We will continue to provide timely updates on any developments that impact our clients and their plan members or their benefits coverage.

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Business continuity

Question: Does your organization have a business continuity and pandemic plan? What stage are you at in executing this plan?

Answer: Yes. We have a robust and tested business continuity plan. We are regulated by the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions (OSFI) and this is a requirement for life insurance companies. The vast majority of our business is managed digitally and so we have transitioned to running our operations remotely within a very short time frame. About 730 of our 800 employees are working remotely from home and are fully functional. The rest are working in roles that require them to be in the office and we have implemented social distancing practices. We have a large number of metrics produced both in real-time and aggregated daily that demonstrate that, so far, we have seen no disruption in claims paying and all other service levels. We are within all of our high service standards.

Question: Does the business continuity/pandemic plan allow the continuation of essential services (e.g., managing and paying claims with reasonable claims turnaround time, maintaining eligibility, answering claims/service related calls) provided by your organization?

Answer: Yes. In fact, our plan deals with far more than essential services, and we are pleased to say that we are fully operational, providing all services, essential or otherwise, within our high service standards.

Question: Can your organization continue to provide these essential services in situations where the pandemic continues to spread?

Answer: Yes. Our business is near 100% digital and is being operated almost entirely on a remote basis at this time. And it can operate that way indefinitely. Because of that, we think the chances that large numbers of staff getting infected at the same time is very, very low. Regardless, should we find ourselves in that very unlikely situation, many of our claims paying staff are trained in different functions and we can reallocate resources according to the greatest need.

Question: Does your organization continue to meet or exceed OFSI or other applicable provincial regulatory capital requirements? And can it do so if the pandemic continues for a longer period of time?

Answer: Yes. Our LICAT ratio at the end of December was one of the strongest in the industry, and based on recent estimates following recent market volatility, it continues to far exceed OSFI requirements.

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Claim overpayments

Question: If an employee is laid off and unable to reimburse us for a claim overpayment, will we consider a longer repayment plan than usual?

Answer: Yes, we will be flexible with timelines and payment plans.

EFAP – Adding quickly

Question: Can we quickly add the Homewood Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) to our benefits?

Answer: We are ready to support fast amendments to add the Homewood EFAP to any existing Equitable Life policy. We do not require the standard 10 days for turn around and, in special needs situations, we can add within just a few days. *(Note to Field: If you have a customer-specific situation, please reach out to Kari Gough and she can support the end-to-end implementation for our customers.)*

Hours – Changes to minimum number

Question: If office hours are reduced, should I report these changes?

Answer: Yes. Any changes to the minimum number of hours must be submitted as an amendment. Changes to hours of work for hourly employees also need to be reported so volumes can be updated appropriately.

Layoffs – Support

Question: I am temporarily laying off my employees. What are my options? How long can benefits be extended?

Answer: The employer can either terminate all benefits or extend all benefits for up to three months. Approval for extensions beyond three months must be requested from your Group Account Executive. The employer should ensure they treat all employees consistently. The employer can not extend benefits for some employees but not others. This is selection and not consistent with the principles of group insurance.

Question: Can I extend some benefits for all employees during a temporary layoff?

Answer: Yes. The employer can choose to extend only some benefits for all employees during a temporary layoff on an exception basis. Please speak to your Group Account Executive. The employer should ensure they treat all employees consistently.

Question: I would like to continue benefits that require employee contributions but I have no way of collecting the premium during the temporary layoff. What are my options if I want to pay all the premiums?

Answer: For Life, Health and Dental, there are no issues, the employer can pay all premiums if they choose. For non-taxable disability benefits, the employer can pay the premiums during the leave, and charge them to the employee when they return to work. Other options should be discussed with their Advisor or Accountant. The employer may also terminate disability during the leave.

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Question: If I issue a Record of Employment so an employee can claim for Employment Insurance (EI), can the employee remain on the Group plan for all benefits?

Answer: Yes, this is a temporary layoff and benefits can be extended for up to three months.

Question: Can I require employees to pay 100% of the premiums during a temporary layoff?

Answer: Existing cost sharing arrangements should continue during the layoff. In the event of a layoff or leave, we recommend that employers encourage members to remain in the plan and maintain their coverage. We also recommend that they treat all employees consistently.

If an employee chooses not to continue an employee paid benefit, they must be reinstated by the employer within the first 31 days of their return to work. Otherwise, they will be considered a late applicant and will be subject to evidence of insurability.

If the plan member becomes disabled during the layoff and has maintained their disability benefit(s), they are eligible to submit a claim on the first day that they would have returned to work. If they do not maintain their disability benefit(s), they will not be eligible to submit a claim.

Question: As an employer, I want to continue to pay my employees even though they will not be reporting to work. What are my options?

Answer: This would be considered the same as a leave of absence and our three-month benefit continuation would apply as long as premiums continued to be paid.

Question: What happens with our benefits plan if we lay off all our employees and then rehire them when this gets better?

Answer: A plan sponsor can temporarily terminate their benefit program for up to 120 days. During that time, we will keep the policy in place on our system so we can support a quick and easy re-implementation with no added administrative burden once employees are back on the job.

Number of lives

Question: We need to decrease the number of lives below our minimum for a short period of time. What are our options?

Answer: Our minimum is three full-time permanent lives in order to maintain benefits. Please discuss with your Group Account Executive or myFlex Sales Manager when other circumstances occur.

Plan suspension

Question: Will I be able to suspend my benefit plan if needed? How long would I be able to suspend my plan for? What are the reinstatement rules?

Answer: A plan sponsor can temporarily terminate their benefit program for up to 120 days. During that time, we will keep the policy in place on our system so we can support a quick and easy re-implementation with no added administrative burden once employees are back on the job.

Premium payments

Question: Can we defer payment of our premiums? Will grace periods be extended for premium payment?

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Answer: We recognize that these are very difficult times for many employers, and we will consider these requests on a case-by-case basis. A customized approach to each request will allow us to consider the unique circumstances and needs of each individual client.

Question: I can no longer continue to pay my premiums. What are my options?

Answer: Benefit continuation is possible when premiums continue to be paid. If that is not possible, the plan should be terminated. Once the plan sponsor is back up and running, we will work to support the re-implementation of their group benefits program. We will maintain the employer's plan designs in our systems to make that a very quick and easy process.

Quoted rates

Question: Will you honour quoted rates if our plan membership changes between quote and implementation.

Answer: Yes. We will honour quoted rates as long as we are able to determine that those changes are driven by COVID-19 and we have reason to believe that the group will return to the anticipated size within a reasonable period of time.

Renewals

Question: I am not in a position right now to give my group renewal the attention and consideration that it requires. Are any provisions being made regarding deferring or extending group renewals?

Answer: We are managing these requests on a case-by-case basis. A customized approach to each request will allow us to consider the unique circumstances and needs of each individual client.

Short-Term Disability

Question: I have an employee who is self-isolating because they have tested positive for COVID-19. Are they eligible for short-term disability?

Answer: Yes. Plan members who have tested positive for COVID-19 are eligible for coverage from Day 1 of their self-isolation period if they are unable to work from home.

Question: I have an employee who is self-isolating because they have symptoms consistent with COVID-19, but they have not been tested. Are they eligible for short-term disability?

Answer: Yes. Plan members who have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 but have not been tested are eligible for coverage if they are unable to work from home. Claims will be assessed according to the terms of their plan.

Question: I have an employee who has no symptoms consistent with COVID-19 but has been instructed by a health professional to quarantine themselves because they have come in contact with someone who is infected with COVID-19. Are they eligible for short-term disability?

Answer: No. Plan members who have no symptoms consistent with COVID-19 are not eligible for short-term disability. These plan members should inquire with their employer about options for working from home, if appropriate, or consider applying for Employment Insurance (EI) benefits.

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Question: I have an employee who has no symptoms consistent with COVID-19 but who is voluntarily quarantining themselves because they have recently returned from outside the country. Are they eligible for short-term disability?

Answer: No. Plan members who have no symptoms consistent with COVID-19 are not eligible for short-term disability. These plan members should inquire with their employer about options for working from home, if appropriate, or consider applying for Employment Insurance (EI) benefits.

Question: I have an employee who has no symptoms consistent with COVID-19 but is voluntarily quarantining themselves because they have been instructed by their employer to quarantine themselves. Are they eligible for short-term disability?

Answer: No. Plan members who have no symptoms consistent with COVID-19 are not eligible for short-term disability. These plan members should inquire with their employer about options for working from home, if appropriate, or consider applying for Employment Insurance (EI) benefits.

Travel Assist

Question: I have an employee who is currently outside the country and has symptoms consistent with COVID-19 or has tested positive for COVID-19. What should they do?

Answer: If a plan member is currently travelling abroad and is experiencing symptoms or is hospitalized with suspicion of the coronavirus, they should contact Travel Assist at the numbers listed below for assistance and to confirm their coverage.

- Toll-free Canada/USA: 1.800.321.9998
- Global call collect: 519.742.3287
- Allianz Global Assistance ID #9089

Question: I have employees who departed the country after the Government of Canada issued its Global Travel Advisory. Are they still eligible for Travel Assist coverage?

Answer: Yes. We will continue to cover plan members for all eligible medical expenses, including those related to COVID-19, for trips outside Canada. Given the global situation is evolving quickly, we will continue to monitor developments and update you accordingly.

In spite of this, we strongly urge you to advise your employees not to travel outside of the country at this time. The risk is high and the options for returning to Canada are now limited. Further, we urge you to advise employees who are outside the country to return to Canada earlier than scheduled, if possible.

Question: I have employees who need to travel across the border as an essential part of their job (i.e. truck drivers). Will they continue to be covered under Travel Assist?

Answer: Yes, these employees will continue to be covered if they have Travel Assist on their plan.

Question: If my employee travelled prior to the travel restrictions and is unable to return to the country for whatever reason (flights cancelled, etc.) will they still be covered if the travel period expires (i.e. they have 30 days and are now nearing that mark and no way to get home). Does the travel insurance automatically extend?

Answer: We will extend coverage if people are unable to return to Canada.

Question: I have a plan member with a parent living in the US, and they need to be with them during upcoming surgery. If they leave now, will they have coverage despite the government's Global Travel Advisory?

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In spite of this, we strongly urge you to advise your employees not to travel outside of the country at this time. The risk is high and the options for returning to Canada are becoming limited. Further, we urge to you to advise employees who are outside the country to return to Canada earlier than scheduled, if possible.