

COVID-19 Guidance for Faith-Based Organizations

COVID-19 is an infection caused by a new type of coronavirus that can cause acute respiratory illness. In general, these viruses are spread when a sick person coughs or sneezes. COVID-19 is spread person-to-person through large respiratory droplets (e.g. coughing, sneezing) that can travel up to two metres. It may also be possible for a person to get COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. The majority of people with COVID-19 develop a mild illness, which may include fever, cough, or shortness of breath. For more general information about COVID-19, visit www.toronto.ca/coronavirus.

The following are recommendations to help reduce the risk of exposures to acute respiratory illnesses including COVID-19 in faith-based settings. This guidance also provides planning considerations in the event there is community spread of COVID-19.

Advice for faith-based organizations to start implementing now:

- **Immediately suspend any services; if you hold events, ensure they are reduced to fewer than 50 people as per the order under the Ontario Premier.**
- **Practice social distancing; suspending services and / or greatly reducing the size or services and / or using virtual / online ways to connect are ways to practice social distancing. For more advice around physical distancing, see our [Practicing Social Distancing fact sheet](#).**
- **Actively encourage sick staff and visitors to stay home.**
- **Separate people who are sick:**
 - Staff or visitors who appear to have acute respiratory illness symptoms (i.e. cough, shortness of breath) upon arrival or who become sick during the day should be separated from others and sent home immediately.
- **Emphasize respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene and other healthy practices by staff/visitors of the faith-based organization:**
 - Place posters that encourage [staying home when sick](#), [cough and sneeze etiquette](#), [hand washing](#) and [hand sanitizing](#) at the entrance to your organization and in other areas where they are likely to be seen.
 - Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles.
 - Instruct everyone to clean their hands often with an alcohol-based hand rub that contains at least 70% alcohol concentration, or to wash their hands with soap and water for at least 15 seconds. Washing hands with soap and water is preferred if hands are visibly dirty.
 - Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand rub. Ensure adequate supplies are maintained.
- **Enhance cleaning efforts:**
 - Commonly used cleaners and disinfectants are effective against COVID-19.
 - Frequently touched surfaces are most likely to be contaminated.

- Use only disinfectants that have a Drug Identification Number (DIN). A DIN is an 8-digit number given by Health Canada that confirms it is approved for use in Canada.
- Check the expiry date of products you use and always follow manufacturer's instructions.
- In addition to routine cleaning, surfaces that have frequent contact with hands should be cleaned and disinfected twice per day and when visibly dirty. Examples include doorknobs, elevator buttons, light switches, toilet handles, counters, hand rails, touch screen surfaces and keypads.
- Also check with your organization for any specific protocols for cleaning COVID-19.
- **Advise staff to take certain steps before travelling:**
 - Check the Public Health Agency of Canada's [travel advisories](#) for the latest guidance about international travel. Some countries have entry and exit restrictions.
 - Check the [Ontario Government](#) website for additional direction related to travel anywhere outside Canada, including the United States, and actions to take upon return to Canada.

Additional considerations in response to current cases of COVID-19

- Confirmed and suspect cases of COVID-19 are reported by health care providers and laboratories to public health. Other settings do not need to report to public health.
- Public health performs a risk assessment for all exposures including those that may occur in faith-based organizations.
- Public health will provide advice regarding any other measures that the setting or staff may need to take to reduce the risk of transmission.
- Unless advised by Toronto Public Health through the above assessment, there are no restrictions or special measures required for contacts of suspected cases of COVID-19 in the setting. There is no need to close the setting or send people home.
- Public health will advise if any special cleaning processes are recommended. Regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces and hands reduces the risk of infection.

Planning in case of community spread of COVID-19

Organizations should plan to be able to respond in a flexible way to varying levels of severity and be prepared to change their operations plan as needed.^{CDC} Keep up to date with information on the [Toronto Public Health website](#).

Organizations will need to consider how best to decrease the spread of acute respiratory illness and lower the impact of COVID-19 in their setting in the event of community spread. Faith-based organizations should identify and communicate their plan, which may include:

- Reducing the spread among staff.
- Protecting people who are at higher risk for adverse health complications.
- Maintaining operations.^{CDC}

Ensure to:

- Prepare your community:
 - If there is widespread respiratory illness, including COVID-19, in your community, discuss the risks of attending gatherings for those at high risk for medical complications of COVID-19 (e.g. the elderly, people with chronic medical conditions). By avoiding gatherings, these people may reduce their risk of becoming ill.
- Provide alternative options and venues for participation whenever possible for people who are sick.
- Establish a process to communicate information to staff and visitors about COVID-19. Anticipate employee fear, anxiety, rumors, and misinformation, and plan communications accordingly.
- Reduce crowding as much as possible.
- Identify which activities may increase the chance of spreading respiratory illness:
 - People gathering close to one another may increase the risk of respiratory illness. Encouraging communication without physical contact and encouraging people to maintain a two meter distance from each other may reduce the spread of respiratory illness in your community.
 - Many religious services and community meetings involve a time of greeting or recognition by shaking hands or hugging. Consider adopting a policy against hand-shaking, hugging, and kissing. For some faith-based organizations, this could include to refrain from kissing shared objects used in religious ceremonies.
 - Some religious traditions and rituals emphasize eating and drinking from communal dishes and vessels. Respiratory illness may spread in these conditions. If respiratory illnesses is circulating widely in your community, faith and community leaders may consider adjusting such practices in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

More information

For more information, call Toronto Public Health at 416-338-7600.

References

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