COVID-19 Guidance for Cooling Rooms

COVID-19 is an infection caused by a new type of coronavirus. COVID-19 can present as an acute respiratory illness in humans. The virus is spread mainly from person-to-person through close contact. More information on COVID-19 can be found in the Toronto Public Health COVID-19 Fact Sheet.

Extreme heat is associated with a number of health impacts ranging from heat stress to heat stroke, to more serious effects, such as cardiovascular-related disease and/or death. Cooling rooms can provide relief and protection for vulnerable groups who may be at an increased risk for heat-related illnesses. As COVID-19 continues to spread in the community in Toronto, owners and landlords of multi-unit residential buildings should adjust the operation of their cooling rooms to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Recommendations for owners and landlords on how to best protect tenants and staff when operating cooling rooms:

Implement screening measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19

- Post signage at the cooling room entrance, which clearly explains the rules and conditions for entry.
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer (70-90% alcohol concentration) should be available at the entrance to the cooling room.
- Ask tenants to self-screen prior to entry:
  - Do you have any of the following symptoms: fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose or are feeling unwell?
  - Have you been in close contact with someone who is sick or has confirmed COVID-19 in the past 14 days?
  - Have you returned from travel outside Canada in the past 14 days?
- Individuals who have answered NO to all questions can enter the cooling room after performing hand hygiene (i.e. washing hands with soap and water for 15 seconds or using alcohol-based hand sanitizer with 70-90% alcohol concentration).
- Individuals who have answered YES to any of the questions should use a designated alternate room/space within the residential building to separate them from others.
  - Individuals should wear a non-medical mask or face covering and perform hand hygiene prior to entering the alternate space/room.
  - Encourage individuals with symptoms to visit Toronto Public Health’s website to learn about assessment centres, and to help determine if further health care is required.

Alternate room/space for persons with symptoms or with other high risk exposures

- Designate an alternate room/space which is separate from the main cooling room to accommodate individuals who answered YES to any of the screening questions.
  - If an alternate room/space is not available for persons with symptoms or with other high risk exposures, consider partitioning a private space within the cooling room using dividers or curtains.
- Where possible, the alternate room/space should have:
  - A separate entrance and exit.
  - A separate washroom.
  - Partitions separating individuals, in addition to other physical distancing measures.
• Staff should wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) (e.g. gloves, medical mask) and minimize time spent in these areas.
• Where possible, environmental cleaning and disinfection should be conducted after each use of the alternate room/space. More information on cleaning is provided below.
• If an alternate space/room, including a private space within the cooling room, is not a feasible option, tenants with symptoms or other high risk exposures may be directed to the nearest Emergency Cooling Centre on days when a Heat Warning is issued by Environment and Climate Change Canada.

Implement measures to encourage physical distancing
• Physical distancing refers to the practice of avoiding close contact by keeping a distance of two metres (six feet) from others. Physical distancing should be maintained between tenants within the cooling room and can be encouraged with the following strategies:
  o Limit the number of people permitted into the cooling room at any one time:
    ▪ To calculate the maximum number of people that should be permitted in the cooling room at any one time, a good rule of thumb is one person per two metres square (four squared metres) of floor space.
    ▪ Currently, no more than five people may be permitted in the cooling room at any one time, as per provincial direction on gatherings.
  o Once the maximum number of people is reached, one person may enter for every person that leaves.
  o Post signage at the entrance indicating the maximum number of people that can be permitted at any one time.
  o Provide visible queues for tenants who may be waiting in line outside the cooling room by placing markers such as tape or safety cones every two metres/six feet.
  o Design a walking flow for the cooling room (e.g. creating one-way routes with prominent signage and/or floor markings).
  o Arrange chairs/seating a minimum of two metres (six feet) apart and/or place signs in fixed seating spaces.
    ▪ Mark seating locations with tape on the floor so that seating can be repositioned easily.
    ▪ Consider creating separate spaces for family units (i.e. families who live together do not need to maintain physical distancing between each other) and for people with pets.
• Consider other measures to prevent crowding, such as:
  o Implementing time limits for tenants (e.g. during peak use periods) based on individual tenant needs.
  o Creating a schedule with pre-assigned times of use.
• If possible, have staff periodically monitor the cooling room to ensure requirements are being followed.

Increase communication with tenants and staff
• Post educational materials at the entrance to the cooling room and other strategic places to encourage behaviours to prevent transmission of COVID-19 such as:
  o Physical Distancing
  o How to Protect Yourself
  o Information about COVID-19
  o Wash your Hands
Cover your Cough
Hand Sanitizing

- Post information on how tenants can protect themselves from the effects of heat (i.e. Tips to Beat the Heat resource).
- Information can also be communicated on the residential buildings information board, in elevators, website, newsletters and tenant hotlines.

Support and encourage proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette
- Educate tenants and staff on proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
- Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer (70-90% alcohol) in dispensers near entrances and other high touch locations. Monitor and refill dispensers as needed.
- Provide additional supplies such as tissue boxes and no-touch waste receptacles in appropriate areas/locations.

Encourage the use of non-medical masks and face coverings
- Non-medical masks or face coverings are strongly recommended for tenants using the cooling room.
  - Wearing a mask may not protect you from COVID-19, but it may protect others from your respiratory droplets and germs.
  - Masks should not be placed on young children under age two, anyone who has trouble breathing, or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.
- People showing symptoms of COVID-19 or with other high risk exposures (i.e. answered YES to any of the screening questions) should wear a non-medical mask or face covering (e.g. homemade cloth mask, dust mask, bandana, or scarf) while using the alternate room/space.
- Post information on how to safely wear a mask at the entrance and other visible locations in the cooling room.

Water fountains and bottle filling stations
- Avoid the use of communal water fountains and bottle filling stations.
  - Encourage tenants to bring their own water bottle to stay hydrated.

Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) system
- Ensure the HVAC system for the cooling room is adequately maintained.
- Where provided, utilize the highest efficiency filters that are compatible with the HVAC system.
- Cooling rooms provided with ceiling fans should have an upward airflow rotation.
  - Seating should be arranged away from areas with high airflow (i.e. not in front of air vents).

Enhance environmental cleaning and disinfection protocols
- Educate staff on how to use cleaning agents and disinfectants:
  - Required disinfectant contact times (i.e. amount of time that the product will need to remain wet on a surface to achieve disinfection).
  - Safety precautions and required PPE.
  - Directions for where and how to securely store cleaning and disinfectant supplies.
Disinfectants should 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 dates of products you use, and always follow the manufacturer’s instructions.
  - Refer to Health Canada's list of hard-surface disinfectants for use against coronavirus (COVID-19) to search by product name, active ingredient, company etc.

High traffic areas and frequently touched surfaces and objects (e.g. doorknobs, elevator buttons, light switches, toilet handles, countertops, hand rails) should be cleaned and disinfected by designated staff at least twice per day, and when visibly dirty.

Provide seating and furniture which are easy to clean and disinfect.
  - Provide disinfecting wipes for tenants to wipe down seating areas prior to use.

Where provided, increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting washrooms.

More information
For more information, visit our website at www.toronto.ca/COVID19 or call us at 416-338-7600.

Useful Resources
COVID-19 Guidance for Employers, Workplaces and Businesses Fact Sheet
Strategies for Community Partners to Practice Physical Distancing and Reduce the Spread of COVID-19

References