

Update on COVID-19
Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health
June 3, 2020 at 3:45 p.m.
Members' Lounge, Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

- Thank you Mayor Tory and good afternoon. Today there are 139 new COVID-19 infections in Toronto. To date, 8,948 people have recovered, an increase of 165 since yesterday. As always, for more detailed data on the status of COVID-19 cases in our city, please visit our website.
- I continue to receive questions about case investigation and contact management. As it relates to COVID-19, this is a critical aspect of the work we do at Public Health to protect our community.
- In Toronto, unfortunately we are still seeing approximately 150 people newly diagnosed with COVID-19 each day. For each one of these individuals, a key role of local public health is to investigate how the person got their infection and to identify and follow-up with people they unknowingly exposed in the days leading up to their confirmed diagnosis. This is what is known as case and contact management.
- Case and contact management is a complex and time-consuming process. The first step in this process happens when we are informed of a positive test for any communicable disease, including COVID-19. As soon as we receive complete contact information for someone in the community who has tested positive for COVID-19, a skilled case investigator connects with them to start taking a thorough history.
- On the face of it, taking a detailed history may not seem like something that requires a great deal of skill, but it is more complicated than it might seem. In the case of COVID-19 investigations, the history taking includes working with the person to recall all their daily activities and who they came into contact with, in the 2 weeks prior to the onset of their symptoms. We ask them questions about:
 - What symptoms they have and when they started;

--What activities they did and what locations they visited for the 2 weeks before symptoms started; and

--Who they came into contact with during this 2 week period.

- For many of us, trying to remember this level of detail for what we did yesterday is challenging. It is even more complicated when you are being asked to recall this kind of detail from 2 weeks ago – especially when you are sick with COVID-19. This is why it is so important to have skilled investigators on the job. In addition to having great communication skills, investigators use interviewing techniques and memory aids to help people reconstruct the past two weeks' events before their symptoms started. Getting as much detail as possible is important from a public health point of view to help us identify where and how people are becoming infected with COVID-19.
- Aside from this investigative work, we also follow up with those who have tested positive through daily phone calls to check in with them, see how their symptoms are and to ask about their general wellbeing as they recover.
- As just mentioned, the information gathered through our detailed case investigation efforts helps us to pinpoint where and when the person may have become infected.
- Equally important, however, is identifying anyone who might now be infected because of contact with the case we are investigating. In this step of the investigation, public health staff assess the potential health risk to those people who have been exposed to a COVID-19 case when they were infectious, using an evidence-based risk framework.
- We look at things like the type of contact involved. Do they live in the same household? Are they co-workers? If so, in what kind of work space and how closely do they work with each other? We also assess the duration of the contact, and then categorize all of this into a list of close, non-close and casual contacts. We obtain information on those identified as close contacts and connect with them, advise them of their exposure to someone who has COVID-19 and ask that they quarantine themselves to reduce the potential

spread of COVID-19. We also provide them with advice on when to seek COVID-19 testing.

- The number of contacts for each COVID-19 case can vary depending on an individual's living, work and social situations. Some people have very few points of contact – especially since public health and physical distancing measures were put in place. In these situations, the work of following up on contacts can be completed quickly – sometimes within a few hours. More complex contact identification that involves many close contacts across jurisdictions can take much longer. This was certainly the case at the beginning of our COVID-19 outbreak back in January when people were moving around much more in our community. And it may be the case again as our city opens up.
- Case and contact management is critical to containing virus spread and keeping people in our community safe. It helps reduce the spread of COVID-19 at the individual level by identifying where someone may have become infected and who they, in turn, many have infected. This data also helps to determine how COVID-19 is spreading through the community to inform our public health strategies to contain the disease.
- I cannot emphasize enough just how valuable the details gathered from our case investigations and contact management efforts are, as part of our work to protect your health.
- As we seek to safely reopen the city and ease public health restrictions, case and contact management will be especially important to combatting COVID-19 in our community. In this context, my team has taken unprecedented measures to scale up our capacity to meet these demands.
- Due in large part to public health interventions like vaccines, thankfully, most communicable disease outbreaks have a limited impact on the health of our city. But COVID-19 is different. Here we are dealing with a new virus, to which no one is immune and for which we have no specific treatments, or vaccines. As a result, we are seeing many Torontonians get sick with COVID-19, at a scale that we have never seen before. On average we manage about 45,000 cases

of all communicable diseases at Toronto Public Health each year. So far, there have been almost 12,000 COVID-19 cases in the last 3 months in Toronto and we continue to manage other communicable diseases.

- However, we have quickly adapted to this new reality:
 - At the very beginning of our COVID-19 response, we had 50 staff working on case and contact management. We have since mobilized over 550 staff to conduct case investigations and contact tracing. We have also partnered with the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, the University of Toronto, other local public health departments and a number of other agencies to boost this workforce by 200 more. To put this in context, our case and contact management team is now larger than most other local public health departments – and, given the ongoing need, it continues to grow.
 - In addition, despite staffing up, as we were responding to COVID-19, we found that the existing provincial communicable disease data system used by all local public health units was not equipped to support the work of managing an outbreak of this magnitude. Given this new reality, my team partnered with the City to build a new case management system in an unprecedented 8 weeks, during this global emergency. We did this to better and more quickly track test results, hospitalizations and deaths. We are also conducting area-based analysis of our data to track the impact of COVID-19 in our city.
- This has been a truly unprecedented outbreak for us at Toronto Public Health. Never before have we had to manage so many cases, so rapidly. Indeed, this is the largest and longest case and contact management effort in our history and I believe in Canada's history. As such, we have struggled at times to keep up with the workload because the current public health systems and processes, and the ways they connect with the broader health system were not designed for a pandemic of this scale. Despite the enormity of these challenges, we have made great efforts to adapt and respond to our city's needs.
- In fact, while the media have reported delays in our case follow up times, our data shows that from May 27-29, we were able to contact almost 90% of new COVID-19 cases within 24 hours. This rate changes daily depending on the number of cases that we receive, however, we continue to work hard to get this number even higher. In addition, we know, based on the experiences of

other jurisdictions that we can expect to see further surges of COVID-19 activity. So, we continue to put systems in place so that we are prepared.

- I also want to share that my team has extensively reviewed our own internal case and contact management processes to improve our work in this critical function. In addition, we brought in staff from the City's Emergency Operations Centre to conduct their own independent review of our work. We asked them to do this to ensure that we do not miss any opportunity to improve our response during this pandemic and also to help us to prepare for the future.
- My team and I are committed to making improvements every step of the way. And so: --We continue to scale up staff as our local situation evolves
--We work with labs to streamline results-sharing, and
--We work with health system partners to more quickly identify and manage cases of COVID-19 and their contacts, to reduce virus spread.
- In closing, I want to thank you for your continued commitment to our public health measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in our city. I know that this gets more challenging as time goes on. We are doing everything we can to protect you and the health of the city and ask you to continue to do the same. So please continue to practise physical distancing and take care of each other.

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