

COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship

People seeking spiritual guidance or to commemorate a milestone look to faith leaders and organizers to keep their families safe. The impact of COVID-19 on the health of residents are not yet fully known. The elder, and people with underlying health conditions are at greater risk of serious complications and hospitalization. Risk of virus spread are higher with indoor gatherings, people in close contact or in a poorly ventilated area.

This guidance is a layered approach, with multiple measures to mitigate risks, and support community faith leaders and organizers of religious rites or ceremonies to plan for safer events.

What you need to know

COVID-19 is spread by respiratory droplets. Many of the COVID-19 cases are from in-person transmission, sometimes even before symptoms begin. To keep everyone safe, we need to keep the gathering size low, allow space for physical distancing and limit the length of time people are together.



Number

Reduce gathering size for physical distancing & better ventilation.



Proximity

Maintain physical distancing & wear a mask to avoid respiratory droplets



Duration

Limit the length of time people are together.

1. Limit Gathering Sizes

All religious services, rites, ceremonies and related celebrations must comply with the [Reopening Ontario Act – Stage 3 Orders](#).

Changes to gathering limits,

To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, the government of Ontario has limited social gatherings and events. The new limits do not apply to gatherings for the purpose of religious service, rites and ceremonies. However, [social gatherings](#) that take place before or after a religious services including [wedding](#) and [funeral](#) receptions must adhere to the public gathering limits as described below.

Events that contravene public health orders are subject to [fines](#), set by the government of Ontario.

Allowable Gathering Size, are based on the type of event and by location

Type of event	Gatherings for religious service, rite, or ceremonies	Social gatherings before or after a religious service or ceremony (e.g. wedding reception)
Indoor	30% of room capacity or less	10 people or less
Outdoor	100 people or less	25 people or less

- All gathering limits are subject to guests' ability to maintain two metres/six feet physical distance from those they do not live with.

- Calculate the maximum number of people that can be accommodated in a room or structure while maintaining two meters distancing. This number cannot exceed the gathering limits listed above, **whichever is less**.
- Consider offering virtual, or smaller and more frequent services, if the demand exceeds occupancy limits.
- For religious services organized in tented backyards, the size of the gathering is 100 people or less, based on the ability for everyone to maintain physical distancing. However, if there is a social event after the ceremony, the gathering size is limited to 25 people or less.

2. Communicate



- Inform staff and attendees of the changes to protect them from COVID-19.
- Encourage everyone to download the [COVID Alert app](#)
- Print and display posters by entrances, hallways, elevators, kitchens and meeting rooms.
 - [mask or face covering bylaw](#)
 - [screening for COVID-19 symptoms](#)
 - [physical distancing](#)
 - [hand washing, cover your cough, hand sanitizing](#)

3. Physical distancing measures



- Providing services by virtual means such as live streaming, drive-in or by phone are safer.
- Modify the layout to allow spacing for staff, volunteers and visitors to maintain physical distancing.
- Everyone must maintain physical distancing, except people in the same household.
- Consider organizing service attendance by grouping, similar to school cohorts, so the same people or families attend the same service, to minimize mixing of different groups.
- Anticipate areas where people will naturally gather (e.g. outside, hallway, foyer). Assign staff or volunteers to remind everyone about physical distancing.
- Remove or tape off seats for two metre distance between visitors and alternative rows.

Revised October 30, 2020

- Consider assigning seats and encourage visitors to remain in their designated space throughout the service.
- Use floor markings and signs for one-way directional movement to reduce crowding, especially by entrances, exits, hallways, and restrooms.
- Consider having stewards to manage the seating, and exit the room row by row.

4. Health screening



- Staff and volunteers must [self-screen for symptoms of COVID-19](#) before every shift or event. Self-screening can be done online, on paper, by reviewing the poster, or asking staff directly.
- Post the [COVID-19 screening](#) at entrances to encourage visitors to self-screen.
- Anyone feeling unwell should stay home, even if the symptoms are mild.

5. Hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette



- Provide hand sanitizer stations at entrances, and in high traffic areas, if available.
- Top up supplies of liquid hand soap, paper towel, hand sanitizer, and tissues.
- Encourage frequent handwashing with soap and water or use 70-90% alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Note hand sanitizer will not work, if hands are dirty or greasy.
- Avoid touching face with unwashed hands.
- Cover your cough or sneeze into your sleeve or with a tissue.
- Gloves are not necessary. Do not use disposable gloves as a substitute for hand hygiene.

6. Use of masks or face coverings



- Everyone must wear a mask indoors, with some exceptions, see City [mask bylaw](#) and [O. Reg. 263/20](#).
- Develop a policy on the wearing of masks. Refer to [Guidance on Mask and Face Covering Bylaw](#) for a sample policy your organization can adapt.
- Train staff on the mask bylaw and your organization's policy, including who is exempt and how to [safely wear a cloth mask](#) or face covering. More information is available [here](#).
- Masks or face coverings should not be used by children under the age of two and anyone who has trouble breathing.
- A mask or face covering should be worn outdoors when physical distancing cannot be maintained.
- Some people who cannot wear a mask, are exempted from the bylaw. Proof of exemption is not required. Consider providing alternatives for people who are unable to wear a mask (e.g. virtual services, specific timed services).

7. Adapt, modify or suspend activities to reduce virus spread



- As community spread increases, consider virtual, outdoor or drive-in services for elders and people with chronic medical conditions.

Revised October 30, 2020

- Shorten services to limit the length of time visitors spend at the facilities, when possible.
- Discourage sharing items used in worship and services, such as chalice, holy water stoup, washing facilities, prayer books, cushions, shawls, prayer rugs, etc. If it is necessary, then limit the number of individuals who have contact with the materials or objects. If books are used, set the books aside for a week between uses.
- Discontinue passing offering plates and similar items that move between people. Use alternative options such as a secure drop box or digital systems for touch-less offerings.
- When possible, provide single-use sheets/leaflets or digital copies or ask congregants/visitors to bring personal items instead.
- Avoid sharing work equipment and supplies, such as phones, office computers, where possible. When items must be share, clean and disinfect between uses.
- Suspend activities that increase the risk of [COVID-19 transmission](#).
- Avoid personal greetings such as hugs, handshakes, kissing of hands or cheeks.
- If distributing one time use items, wash hands prior to distribution or sharing.
- Consider leaving materials/objects to be distributed on a table for people to pick up.
- Use personal protective equipment (PPE), such as medical mask, goggles or face shields for rites requiring close physical contact (e.g. baptism, circumcision). Never share PPE.
- Encourage speakers to use a microphone instead of projecting their voice, to reduce the spread of respiratory droplets.
- Have separate microphones for each speaker or singer. Do not share. Clean and disinfect microphones according to manufacturer's instructions after each use.

8. For drive-in services

- Vehicles should include only members of the same household.
- Encourage people to remain in their vehicles, except to use the washroom.
- Ensure vehicles are parked at least two metres/six feet apart.
- Encourage drivers to turn off their car engines to reduce exhaust from idling.

9. Guide for vocalists and musicians

Singing or use of wind instruments, can expel respiratory droplets further than 2 metres, increasing the risk of spreading COVID-19. Consider mitigating the risk, with alternative options.

- Group or congregational singing is strongly discouraged, even with masks.
- Host virtual performances, pre-recorded audio/ video music, or use string, keyboard and percussion instruments.
- Limit the number of singers/ vocalists to the fewest possible.
- Performances are limited to a **10 person** audience. For more than 10 people performances may be provided in a [drive-in or drive-through](#) format only.

Revised October 30, 2020

- Have singers / musicians face away from others when singing/ playing wind instruments. Or use barriers, such as plexiglass between performers and attendees. Barriers need to be cleaned and disinfected after each use.
- All musicians should keep at least two metres distance from other performers, conductor and attendees. Length of instruments should be accounted for when determining physical distancing between individuals.
- Dancing, singing and the live performance of brass or wind instruments are prohibited where food is served.

10. Maintain attendance records



- Keep an attendance record of all staff, volunteers and visitors. Include name, date, time/ event, email address or phone number. Information may be gathered beforehand if there is online registration or invitation, or collected at the entrance, either verbally or written on a sheet (but do not share pen).
- Any personal information that is collected is voluntary and can only be used for the purpose of contact tracing, unless an individual provides their consent.
- All personal information should be kept in locked drawer or office. Records should be kept for 30 days, and then shredded.

11. Have a plan for responding to illness



- Develop a plan in the event someone becomes sick while at your place of worship.
- Have a room where the person can be isolated until they can go home safely in a vehicle or receive medical attention.

12. Enhance cleaning and disinfection



- Wash religious garments and linens after each service or event, at the hottest temperature setting possible.
- Assign staff or volunteers to clean and disinfect frequently, between services or at least twice daily. Keep a cleaning log to track activities. Where possible, use of a vacuum with a HEPA filter instead of sweeping floors.
- Allow sufficient time between services to properly [clean and disinfect](#) high touched surfaces and common areas such as door handles, counters, cabinet doors, light switches, faucets, toilet handles, handrails, touch screen surfaces, keypads and ceremonial objects.
- Line the waste bins with plastic bags and empty waste bins often.
- Change gloves when changing tasks, or more often as necessary.
- Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds after taking off gloves.
- Always read the labels. Avoid mixing cleaning agents. Use in a well ventilated area.
- Refer to Health Canada's [lists of disinfectants for use against coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

13. Heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems

- Increase the introduction and circulation of outdoor air by maximizing the outdoor air ratio of the HVAC system settings, or by opening windows and doors, where possible. Avoid recirculating air.
- Ensure the HVAC system(s) are properly maintained.
- Use the highest efficiency filters that are compatible with the HVAC system.
- Increase air-exchanges if possible.
- Keep areas near HVAC inlets and outlets clear.
 - Seating should be arranged away from areas with high airflow (i.e. not in front of air vents).
- Facilities without HVAC systems should increase ventilation by opening windows and doors. However, do not open windows and doors if doing so poses a safety risk to staff and visitors.
- Rooms where ceiling fans are used should have an upward airflow rotation.
- If portable fans are used, limit the blowing of air across people and surfaces by positioning them to provide an upward movement of air.
- There is no evidence for the use of portable air purifiers to prevent the spread of COVID-19. If used, follow the manufacturer's directions (and possibly the advice of a service professional) to decide where best to place the device. Follow the manufacturer's instructions on maintenance.
- For more information, see [COVID-19: Transmission, Aerosols and Ventilation](#).

14. Childcare or Children's Programs

- Childcare or children's programming, should comply with [COVID-19 Guidance for Day Camps](#) and [Early Years Guidelines](#) for younger children. Childcare for infants is discouraged.

15. Additional Resources

- [COVID-19 Advice: Religious Services, Rites or Ceremonies](#)
- [Planning a Funeral Reception / Celebration of Life during COVID-19 Checklist](#)
- [COVID-19 Checklist for Planning a Wedding](#)
- [Guidance for Drive-in/Drive-thru Events](#)
- [Guidance for Employers on Preventing COVID-19 in the Workplace](#)
- [COVID-19 Guidance for Indoor & Outdoor Events & Gatherings](#).

More information



Provincial orders under the [Reopening Ontario Act](#) and/or [guidance related to religious services, rites or ceremonies](#) may change. Please visit toronto.ca/COVID-19 on a regular basis for updates or call us at 416-338-7600.