

# Public Health Principles for Living with COVID-19 and Protecting the Most Vulnerable Citizens

## Southwestern Public Health Recommendations for Communities, Businesses and Organizations

Last Updated: March 15, 2022

### Background

Recently, the Province of Ontario announced a plan to **live with and manage COVID-19** for the long-term. This plan includes removing mandatory requirements for businesses and organizations to have vaccination policies, and removing mask mandates, except for in certain settings. Changes take effect March 21, 2022 and the *Reopening Ontario Act* will expire on March 28, 2022. These recommendations relay the importance of continued implementation of public health principles, on a voluntary basis, in certain settings to protect the most vulnerable people from COVID-19.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults experienced the greatest risk to their health and lifespan. In the Southwestern Public Health (SWPH) region, 48% of all hospitalizations and 76% of all fatalities associated with COVID-19 were in those aged 70+. This data demonstrates the disproportionate and inequitable burden the pandemic has on seniors. Age is the most significant risk factor; those with underlying health conditions and/or immune compromised also remain at greater risk.

### Key Considerations

- We have a collective obligation to protect the most vulnerable from severe illness and death due to COVID-19, a virus that continues to circulate in our community. This includes protecting older adults and immune compromised individuals.
- We have a collective responsibility to respect one another and the personal decisions one makes to protect their own health.
- We need a collective approach to protect each other and ourselves from COVID-19 while recognizing the need to resume a sense of normalcy.
- Vaccination is our strongest defence against COVID-19. As such, vaccination policies should be maintained where possible as a protective strategy to safeguard workplace health and safety.
- Businesses and organizations should continue to support physical distancing where feasible.
- Masking policies should still be considered based on the setting and the vulnerability of people.
- Workplaces may experience an increase in absenteeism when public health measures are lifted.

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## Safety Plans

- As of March 21, safety plans are no longer required under the Reopening Ontario Act. Safety plans do remain a good strategy to ensure employers are meeting their obligation to protect employees' health and safety. Information on how to create a safety plan is [found here](#).

## Screening Employees and Patrons

- As of March 21, passive screening of patrons is no longer required. Active screening of employees is also no longer required. However, active screening is one way to ensure that employees stay home if they are sick or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.
- Southwestern Public Health suggests that workplaces have all employees and volunteers use a screening tool, if one or more of the following applies to them:
  - They have symptoms consistent with COVID-19
  - They are a close contact of a suspect COVID-19 case
  - They have a household member who is ill
  - They have travelled
  - They plan to visit a vulnerable individual

## Face Coverings/Masks

- Early evidence demonstrates that the implementation of mask mandates in community settings was associated with reductions in COVID-19 case growth (Public Health Ontario, March 2022).
- As of March 21, 2022, face coverings/masks will no longer be required in most public places except for public transit, long-term care homes, retirements homes and other health care settings, congregate care and living settings, shelters, and jails.
- Workplaces may choose to implement and/or maintain a face mask policy.
- Masking policies should be considered, based on the setting, to protect the most vulnerable people from COVID-19. This may include health care settings and settings where older adults live, congregate and/or recreate such as long-term care homes, retirement homes, seniors' centres and/or churches/places of worship. The wearing of masks should be considered when singing in large groups.
- Public Health Ontario recommends a respirator (KN95) or a well-fitted medical mask to protect against COVID-19. The Public Health Agency of Canada states that some high-quality, three-layer non-medical masks can help prevent the spread of COVID-19 like medical masks. Proper mask fit determines effectiveness. Learn more about [types of masks and respirators](#)

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## Ensuring Employees Stay Home When Sick or with Symptoms of COVID-19

- Employees should not come to work if they have:
  - [Symptoms of COVID-19](#)
  - Tested positive for COVID-19 (on a Rapid Antigen or PCR test)
- Employees should complete the screening tool which provides direction on self-isolation requirements for those who are not fully vaccinated with a booster or previously tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 90 days. You can learn more about self-isolation requirements at [www.ontario.ca/exposed](http://www.ontario.ca/exposed) or on the [Southwestern Public Health website](#).
- Have a clear procedure in place for employees to notify a supervisor/manager if they can't attend work. Maintain flexible policies so employees can self-isolate or work from home (if feasible) when necessary. The [Ontario COVID-19 Worker Income Protection Benefit](#) is available until July 31, 2022 to support employees without paid sick time.
- If an employee becomes ill with COVID-19 [symptoms](#) while at work, employees should follow their workplace policy and/or safety plan, to ensure they do not expose others.
- If an employee has symptoms of COVID-19, one negative result on a rapid antigen test is not sufficient to shorten isolation. If two rapid antigen tests completed within 24-48 hours of each other are both negative, the employee can end isolation when symptoms are improving for 24 hours. View our [Guidance on Rapid Antigen Test Use](#) for more information.
- If an employee or someone in their household has symptoms or they have become a contact of a case, direct them to review our [Symptoms or Exposure to COVID-19 factsheet](#)

## Encourage Physical Distancing Where Feasible

- Physical distancing remains an effective public health measure to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- Businesses and organizations should continue to encourage physical distancing of 2 metres where feasible.
- Enabling employees to work from home may allow for improved physical distancing and may reduce employee absenteeism.

## Cleaning, Disinfecting and Hand Hygiene

- Commonly used cleaners and disinfectants are effective against COVID-19.
- Ensure frequent cleaning and disinfecting of high-touch surfaces and common areas such as door handles, counters, cabinet doors, debit machines, elevator buttons, light switches, faucets, toilet handles, handrails, touch screen surfaces and keypads.
- [Washrooms](#) should be cleaned and disinfected frequently to maintain a sanitary environment.

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- Encourage regular hand hygiene by placing hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol) at facility entrances and exits. Recommend washing hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- Only use disinfectants with a Drug Identification Number (DIN) that confirms they are approved for use in Canada. Follow manufacturer's instructions and check the expiry date of products.

## Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC)

- 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 where possible.
- Ensure the HVAC system(s) are adequately maintained.
- Where provided, use the highest efficiency filters that are compatible with the HVAC system.
- Keep areas near HVAC inlets and outlets clear. Seating and activities should be arranged away from high airflow areas (i.e. not in front of air vents).
- Rooms, where indoor 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.

## Vaccination

- Vaccination is our strongest defense against COVID-19.
- Southwestern Public Health encourages all workplaces to develop or maintain workplace vaccination policies for employees. See [Guidance for Workplace Vaccination Policies](#).
- All businesses and organizations should encourage employees to obtain COVID-19 vaccine booster doses as suggested by the [National Advisory Committee on Immunization](#). Visit [www.swpublichealth.ca/covid19vaccine](http://www.swpublichealth.ca/covid19vaccine) for clinic availability.
- Provincial proof of vaccination requirements for patrons entering businesses and organizations have been lifted. Businesses and organizations may voluntarily continue to choose to require proof of vaccination.

## Resuming Normalcy

- The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many unintended negative impacts to our mental, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing. See the [Public Health Agency of Canada's report](#).
- As a community, it is time to start resuming the activities and experiences that are good for our overall health, while being mindful of those who remain at greatest risk of COVID-19.

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- While the principles noted in this guidance should be taken into consideration to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, we acknowledge the community level of fatigue and the desire to resume normal activities that benefit our overall health.
- Being considerate of personal decisions while protecting those at greatest risk of COVID-19 will ensure the least negative impact on the community and the most vulnerable moving forward.

If you have further questions about managing COVID-19 in your workplace or organization, please visit [www.swpublichealth.ca](http://www.swpublichealth.ca) for current information.