

# COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) Places of Worship

## COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship

November 9, 2020

Version 8.0

The Province of Ontario has mandated face coverings in indoor spaces. The term “indoor spaces” refers to the indoor area of the premises of the business or organization and would include a place of worship. Face coverings must cover the nose, mouth, and chin. Some **exemptions** to the use of face coverings apply. Read the **full regulation here**.

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### Key Points

- Face coverings are required in all indoor public spaces.
  - The Ontario mandatory face covering order does NOT allow for the temporary removal of the face covering where physical barriers (e.g., Plexiglass) are provided.
  - As of November 7, 2020, Southwestern Public Health must align with the ‘Green-Prevent’ level under the **COVID-19 Response Framework: Keeping Ontario Safe and Open, including ‘gathering limits’**. **See the section below for details.**
  - All other public health requirements, including physical distancing (even when wearing a face covering) and enhanced cleaning, remain critical to reducing the spread of COVID-19 infections.
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### Guidance

This guidance is subject to change. Please visit the Southwestern Public Health website ([www.swpublichealth.ca/](http://www.swpublichealth.ca/)) regularly for updates and additional guidance. This guidance follows restrictions outlined in the prevent (green) level of Ontario’s **COVID-19 Response Framework: Keeping Ontario Safe and Open**.

### General Considerations

#### Mandatory Face Coverings

As of October 3, 2020, the Province of Ontario mandated face coverings in indoor spaces. Face coverings must cover the nose, mouth and chin. Some **exemptions** to the use of face coverings apply. Read the **full regulation here**. Faith organizations are required to develop a policy and protocols on the

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wearing of face coverings according to a local Letter of Instruction. Here are [additional details](#) and [FAQs](#) about this Letter of Instruction.

**Please note:** Be advised that under the new Ontario face covering regulation, everyone must wear a face covering at all times, even if behind a physical barrier.

## Gathering Limits

Under the [Reopening Ontario Act-Stage 3 Orders](#) and in alignment with the 'Green-Prevent' level under [COVID-19 Response Framework: Keeping Ontario Safe and Open](#), all religious services, rites, or ceremonies and related celebrations/events must comply with the following gathering restrictions:

	Religious service, rite, or ceremony including wedding ceremonies and funeral services	Event/social gathering <sup>b</sup> at a <b>monitored</b> facility <sup>c</sup>	<b>Unmonitored</b> private event/social gathering <sup>d</sup>
<b>Indoor</b>	30 percent capacity of any particular room in the building	50 people or less	10 people or less
<b>Outdoor</b>	100 people or less <sup>a</sup>	100 people or less	25 people or less

All gathering limits are subject to the ability to maintain two metres of physical distancing. Line-ups/patrons congregating outside monitored venues are to be managed by the venue (i.e., ensuring 2-metre physical distancing and face covering requirement while waiting in line).

- A) Includes organized religious services in private backyards. Social gatherings before or after this type of service are limited to 25 people or less outdoors or 10 people indoors.
- B) Includes social activities before and/or after service, receptions with food after service, etc. may be planned or spontaneous.
- C) Includes businesses and facilities operating in accordance with O. Reg. 364/20 (e.g. places of worship).
- D) Includes unstaffed businesses or facilities (e.g. private residences, backyards, parks, and other recreation areas). See [Guidance for Events document](#) for more information.

In addition to mandatory face coverings and gathering limits described above, all places of worship **must** adhere to the following requirements:

- Adapt or suspend all indoor singing and the use of wind instruments – See the "Singing and Musical Instrument" section below for more information.

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- Avoid opportunities for the virus to spread through touch, either directly or indirectly, through surfaces and objects, including objects that may be used in rituals or ceremonies. Any communal items that are shared but are difficult to clean and disinfect (e.g., bibles) should go through a 'wait-time' of 3 days before redistributing.
- Enhance cleaning and disinfection of high touch surfaces (i.e. pews, door handles, etc.).

**Faith community leaders/organizers are responsible for preventing the risk of infection among staff, volunteers, community members, and visitors who participate in their activities.**

## Preparation

- Consider alternative ways to involve individuals at greater risk from COVID-19 (e.g., older individuals or those with chronic health conditions), including online services, letter/card writing, calling networks, etc.
- Plan how to ensure physical distancing by calculating 30% of the available space's capacity for any religious services, rites or ceremonies. This is the maximum number of participants allowed. The reduced capacity number includes all participants except people at their place of work. Note: Under the [Reopening Ontario Act-Stage 3 Orders](#) and in alignment with the 'Green-Prevent' level under [COVID-19 Response Framework: Keeping Ontario Safe and Open](#), children under two years of age are included in the gathering limit.
- Remove seating, or if seating is fixed, mark it unavailable/rope it off to ensure a two-metre distance between rows of seating. Plan the quantity of seating to allow for a two-metre distance between individuals or household groups along each row. If reduced seating capacity is less than the expected attendance, consider re-arranging the services' schedule to provide more frequent, but smaller, services.
- Cohort individuals and families. For instance, organize attendance, so the same individuals/families go to the same service each day/week to minimize the mixing of different individuals/families.
- Plan how to control movement into and out of your facility and ensure a two-metre distance within the space. Separate entrances and exits may not be necessary as participants usually enter and exit within distinct periods.
- Discourage movement against the flow of people moving in the space. It may be necessary to mark off two-metre distances outside or in a vestibule if it is anticipated that lines will form. Consider clear markings on the floors and having someone control leaving the space by seating row to promote physical distancing.
- Consider developing a system to RSVP attendance to specific services or events. This may also allow online screening of attendees at the same time.
- Ensure all water systems (drinking fountains) are safe to use. **If your facility is a small drinking water system, contact SWPH for further direction before opening.**
- Discontinue the use of holy water stoup.
- Develop a schedule for increased routine cleaning and disinfecting.

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## Prevent COVID-19 Outbreaks

- Ensure you have a way to contact attendees if someone has attended your place of worship while contagious.
- Options include keeping a record of online RSVPs, having someone observe and record names, having members sign in through a safe method (do not provide a pen), or providing a list of members upon request.
- If there is a case of COVID-19 who was contagious while attending services, public health will use that list to notify the place of worship attendees and staff. This may include instructions to self-isolate or self-monitor for [COVID-19 symptoms](#).
- Anyone with even one symptom of COVID-19 should stay home. They can call Telehealth, their health care provider, or an assessment centre for guidance about testing.
- Public health will advise any additional cleaning and disinfecting measures needed to reduce the risk of spread in the setting.

## Establish Policies for Health Screening

Staff and volunteers must report illness immediately to their manager and stay home if they are sick. Staff and volunteers must complete the [COVID-19 Online Self-Assessment Tool](#) each time before starting their duties. Persons who become ill while in the service must go home right away and [self-isolate](#). They can call Telehealth, their health care provider, or an assessment centre for guidance about testing.

## Training

Instruct staff and volunteers on proper hand hygiene techniques and respiratory etiquette, when and how to wear face coverings, and how to clean reusable masks or discard single-use masks appropriately. Go to [proper use of non – medical masks](#) and see face covering section above.

## Print and Post Signs

- COVID-19 self-assessment [visitor's sign](#) should be posted at all entrances.
- [Handwashing](#) signs should be posted in high visibility areas.
- [Face covering signs](#) should be posted in high visibility areas.

Add similar information to the organization's website. Encourage attendees to use the [COVID-19 Online Self-Assessment Tool](#) before every visit to the place of worship and/or set up screening stations away from the entrance to avoid crowding.

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## During Services

- Remind everyone not to attend the service in person if they are experiencing **COVID-19 symptoms**.
- Modify the activities before, during and after the service to ensure a two-metre distance between leaders, staff, volunteers and attendees at all times.
- Adapt or suspend regular childcare and children's programming. Any childcare and children's programming should operate in a manner consistent with the **Ministry of Health's COVID Guidance: Summer Day Camps**.
- Activities that increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission should be altered or discontinued.
- Encourage attendees to bring their own face coverings (we recommend you have disposable face coverings on hand for individuals who forget to bring one or have trouble accessing them). Cloth masks can be made with household items such as a T-shirt or bedsheet, or a bandana may be used. Recognize that not everyone will wear a mask (e.g., has a condition that makes breathing difficult). See face covering section above for details. **Physical distancing is still required, even when wearing a face covering.**
- Avoid any physical contact. Encourage people to greet each other with a bow, wave, or any other customary sign of welcome or recognition that does not include physical touching.
- Allow for adequate cleaning and disinfecting of high traffic areas between services.
- Avoid use of items that are difficult to clean, sanitize or disinfect.
- Adapt or suspend sharing or distributing materials or objects, which may include but is not limited to books, communion, microphones, prayer mats, prayer shawls, water, etc. If any materials or objects are shared or distributed:
  - Ensure that hand hygiene is performed prior to distribution or sharing and after sharing.
  - Consider leaving objects or materials to be distributed on a table for individuals to pick up.
  - Limit the number of individuals who have contact with materials or objects.
  - Ensure any materials or objects returned or accessed within the setting are disinfected or not re-used for 3 days.
- Rituals involving close physical contact (e.g. baptism, circumcision) or shared items (e.g. receptacles, washing facilities) are strongly discouraged at this time. If they must be performed, considerations need to be made to provide them safely, such as the use of appropriate personal protective equipment.
- Discontinuing communion is strongly recommended at this time. Discontinue the use of holy water rites.
- Do not pass offering plates. Consider a designed area to offer donations, use online/e-transfer or debit/credit card tap machines or accept mailed-in offerings.
- Encourage hand hygiene with hand sanitizer stations (60-90% alcohol concentration). Avoid access to hand sanitizer by young children without supervision.
- Encourage good respiratory etiquette. Cover mouth and nose with an elbow when coughing or sneezing, even when wearing a mask for added protection.

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## Singing and Playing Musical Instruments

- Singing, loud speech, or wind instruments can generate aerosol and respiratory droplets that may travel further than two metres.
- Adapt or suspend singing, choirs and playing wind or brass instruments
  - Consider using audio or video recordings instead of live singing or wind or brass instrumental music. This is the lowest risk option.
  - Group singing is **strongly discouraged**. A soloist that is at least 4 metres from the congregation and wearing a face covering during the performance is permissible. Under the provincial mandatory face covering Regulation 364/20, the soloist must keep their face covering on even if behind an impermeable barrier.
  - Anyone playing wind or brass instruments should be 2 metres from anyone else and separated by an impermeable barrier. If an impermeable barrier is not used, anyone playing wind or brass instruments should be separated from any other person (outside of the same household) to the greatest extent possible (minimum 2 metres, preferably 4 metres).
  - Individuals playing wind or brass instruments can temporarily remove their face covering and be at least 2 metres and preferably 4 metres apart from others and behind an impermeable barrier.
- If singing outdoors and able to physically distance, face coverings are not required. Because singing may propel aerosols further, a physical distance of greater than 2 metres between singers is recommended.
- If multiple non-wind instruments are being played, ensure physical distancing between musicians unless from the same household.
- Do not share microphones. Clean and disinfect microphones according to manufacturer's instructions after each use.

## Enhanced Cleaning and Disinfection

- It is essential to first clean, then disinfect surfaces.
- Most regular household disinfectant products are effective at eliminating the virus.
- Cleaning and disinfectant products should have an 8-digit Drug Identification Number (DIN) to confirm it is approved for use in Canada. Check the expiry dates of products and always follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- Cleaning/disinfection wipes should only be used for surfaces, and according to the manufacturer's instructions. Alternatively, chlorine bleach solutions may be used for disinfection. Prepare fresh **bleach solution** daily.
- Educate staff on the proper use of cleaning agents and disinfectants, including required disinfectant contact times (amount of time that the product will need to remain wet on a surface to achieve disinfection). Understand safety precautions and the requirements for the use of mask and gloves.

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- Ensure adequate ventilation when using products (e.g. open windows, doors).
- Ensure ventilation systems are operating properly and replace filters as scheduled or sooner.
- Clean and disinfect all high-touch surfaces (e.g. toilets, sinks, door handles, light switches, remote controls) at a minimum twice daily, and when visibly dirty.
- Ensure washrooms are always stocked with liquid soap and paper towels. Antibacterial soap is not required to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- Wash hands with soap and water immediately after cleaning.

Note: Disinfectant wipes may have a combined cleaning and disinfectant in one solution. Depending on how dirty the surface is, it may need to be pre-cleaned as disinfectants may become ineffective when dirt is present. Check instructions on the product's label.

## Drive-in Religious Gatherings

- Only members of the same household can be in one vehicle or non-motorized vehicle.
- Discourage people from leaving their vehicles/non-motorized vehicle during the service, except when using the washroom.
- Vehicles must be parked two metres apart or more. Discourage the idling of engines.
- If faith community leaders, staff or volunteers are to approach a vehicle to provide service to its occupants, everyone must wear a face covering.

## Weddings and Funerals

If a wedding, funeral, or other ceremony occurs within a place of worship, then the maximum number of participants is 30% of the building's capacity. If the wedding or funeral ceremony is taking place outdoors on the grounds of a place of worship, the limit would be 100 attendees. Those attending the outdoor service must also follow proper health and safety advice, including physical distancing from people who are not from the same household. For indoor events, face coverings are required. For outdoor events, face coverings are required if individuals are not able to physically distance.

Please refer to the "Gathering Limits" section above for the gathering limits on wedding and funeral receptions. Those attending the reception must also follow proper health and safety advice, including physical distancing from people who are not from the same household. We recommend that you contact your venue regarding current practices that are acceptable for your reception during COVID-19.

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## Food and Beverages

- Food and beverages may be served to attendees of an event – food is **not** permitted to be served via buffet or communal bowls/platters.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect the premises before opening
  - Wash, rinse and sanitize all food contact surfaces
  - Clean and disinfect all non-food contact surfaces, including high touch areas, such as door handles and equipment knobs
  - Clean and disinfect all high touch surfaces at least twice daily during operation
- Ensure food handlers are trained on best practices to serve food and beverages.
  - Train food handlers on the proper use of gloves and face masks.
  - Gloves are not required, but if used, they must be changed frequently (e.g., between tasks), with handwashing between uses.
  - Encourage frequent handwashing using the correct technique and avoid touching one's face with unwashed hands.
  - Practice safe respiratory etiquette (i.e. cough or sneeze into a bent elbow, and immediately wash your hands with soap and water).

## Other Businesses on Premises

Places of worship that offer free or rented spaces to other groups or businesses must abide by the [emergency orders](#) of the provincial Chief Medical Officer of Health, and all applicable public health guidance documents.

## Additional Resources

[Physical Distancing Poster](#)

[Physical Distancing on Elevators](#)

[Cleaning & Disinfection in Public Spaces](#)

[Physical Barriers for COVID-19 Infection Prevention and Control](#)