

Ministry of Long-Term Care COVID-19 response measures

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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OVERVIEW

1. What has changed?

The FAQs have been updated to align with changes made to the COVID-19 guidance document for long-term care homes.

As the province approaches the end of the respiratory illness season, the Ministry of Long-Term Care is working with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health to update COVID-19 response measures through a phased approach. The first phase involves winding down COVID measures for those living and working in LTC that are no longer appropriate or necessary. Effective **March 31, 2023**:

- Asymptomatic screen testing is no longer required for staff, students, volunteers, support workers, caregivers and visitors. While LTC homes still have the option to implement their own asymptomatic screen testing policies, it is not recommended at this time.
- The ministry no longer requires homes to collect and maintain statistical information of asymptomatic screen testing.
- The recommendation for residents, caregivers and visitors to mask outdoors has been removed, but remains in place for staff when in close proximity to a resident. Indoor masking requirements remains in place.
- Homes will continue to be required to monitor residents daily to detect the presence of infection, including COVID-19, per section 3 of the IPAC Standard. Requirements which go beyond what is required by the IPAC Standard, including daily temperature checks for COVID-19, are no longer required. Please refer to the Ministry of Health's [COVID-19 Guidance: Long-Term Care Homes, Retirement Homes, and Other Congregate Living Settings for Public Health Units](#) for any additional screening practices, including temperature checks for any resident who is symptomatic, has tested positive or has been exposed to COVID-19.
- Homes are no longer required to actively screen residents returning from an absence.
- While passive screening requirements for staff, visitors and caregivers continue, the active screening recommendation for visitors and caregivers has been removed. LTC homes should continue to promote self-monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19 and other respiratory or infectious diseases to prevent the spread of illness in LTC homes and ensure appropriate signage is in place.
- The limit of one caregiver at a time during a COVID-19 outbreak or when a resident is symptomatic or isolating under Additional Precautions, is no longer required. During an outbreak, LTC homes continue to be subject to public health unit (PHU) direction per the Ministry of Health [COVID-19 Guidance: Long-Term](#)

Care Homes, Retirement Homes, and Other Congregate Living Settings for Public Health Units.

- As continuity of activities is essential to the mental health and wellbeing of residents, LTC homes can hold activities without adjusting to optimize for physical distancing.
- LTC homes that have retained their proof-of-vaccination requirements are strongly recommended to revisit their policies, with consideration to the current context of the pandemic and the [Residents' Bill of Rights](#), including the residents' right to receive visitors of their choice. Specifically, while continuing to promote the uptake of boosters, homes are encouraged to consider permitting entry to visitors and qualified staff, regardless of their vaccination status. Licensees should engage with their residents' council, family council, and local PHU to ensure policy revisions are supported by the most current clinical evidence. Licensees are also encouraged to seek independent legal advice as appropriate.
- To reduce reporting burden on long-term care homes, homes are no longer required to submit daily COVID-19 outbreak data to the ministry. Homes continue to be required to report confirmed outbreaks using the Critical Incident System, and to report suspected and confirmed cases to public health units as required under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*.

2. Can long-term care homes have their own policies that go above and beyond the requirements set out by the ministry?

While long-term care homes may go above and beyond requirements that are set out by the Ministry of Long-Term Care (unless otherwise noted in the directive or guidance document), they must do so with careful consideration of the *Fixing Long-Term Care Act, 2021* and the Residents' Bill of Rights. We strongly encourage LTC homes to consult with their legal counsel, resident council and family council, as well as the public health unit, when implementing a policy that goes beyond provincial requirements.

In addition, recognizing the toll that isolation has on the well-being of residents, homes are expected to follow the isolation requirements in the [COVID-19 guidance document for long-term care homes in Ontario](#) and the [COVID-19 Guidance: Long-Term Care Homes, Retirement Homes, and Other Congregate Living Settings for Public Health Units](#), and to not go beyond these requirements unless advised to do so by their local public health unit.

Absences

3. Can residents participate in physical activity such as walks in the immediate area?

It is important for residents to be able to engage in physical activity and take part in activities that bring them joy, comfort, and dignity while remaining safe. Residents who are not under isolation requirements or symptomatic can leave the home to take a walk

in the immediate area to support overall physical and mental well-being, even if the home is in outbreak.

For residents who are in isolation, at the discretion of the public health unit and where operationally feasible, some activities may continue such as one-on-one walks in an empty hallway, with appropriate use of PPE.

4. Do residents have to screen or test upon returning from an absence?

Upon return from an absence, residents are no longer required to be actively screened for signs and symptoms of COVID-19, tested or isolated unless they have symptoms or have tested positive for COVID-19.

Activities

5. Can residents from different units/floors socialize with each other?

Yes, residents can socialize within and across units, when indoors and outdoors. Residents should still follow public health measures, which includes masking (when indoors, as tolerated).

There are no requirements for residents to remain in a cohort unless during an outbreak.

6. Can visitors and essential caregivers join residents for a meal and for social gatherings (both for communal dining or in the resident's room)?

Caregivers and general visitors may accompany a resident for meals or social gatherings.

When caregivers or visitors are joining a resident in a communal dining setting or social gathering, they are required to remain masked for the duration of the meal.

However, recognizing that long-term care residents miss seeing the faces of their loved ones, it is recommended rather than required that caregivers and visitors wear masks when they are alone with a resident in their room. For residents living in shared rooms, homes should seek to designate a space to enable residents who would like to interact with their visitors without masks. When not in a one-on-one setting with a resident in their room or a designated space within the home, visitors and caregivers are required to be masked.

Ward Rooms

7. Can a resident from a three (3) or four (4) bed ward room return to that room if they leave the home?

It depends on whether the resident has left the home on a temporary absence or if the resident was discharged from the home:

- A bed in a ward room must be left vacant if a resident who occupied that bed is discharged from the home **and** there are two or more residents who continue to occupy a bed in that ward room.
- Residents who currently occupy a bed in a ward room with two (2) or more residents are allowed to return to their bed following a temporary absence, including medical absences requiring an admission or a transfer to another health care facility, after testing and isolation (if required).

Screening Requirements

8. What are the screening requirements?

As it is an important tool aimed at reducing the risk of infectious illnesses within homes, COVID-19 screening is still required. At a minimum, long-term care homes must:

- Establish and communicate an operational plan including guidance for staff, students, volunteers, caregivers, support workers, and general visitors to self-monitor for symptoms of COVID-19 (passive screening).
- Provide individuals with information (for example, screening questions) to monitor their health at home for COVID-19 symptoms and inform them that they are not permitted to enter the home if they are feeling ill or would otherwise fail screening.
 - Homes are not required to request verification or an attestation upon entry to the home. Nor are homes required to have staff conduct or verify screening at the door.
- Post signage at entrances and throughout the home that lists the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, for self-monitoring and steps that must be taken if COVID-19 is suspected or confirmed in any individual.

Visitor Policy

9. What are the indoor and outdoor gathering allowances for long-term care home residents?

Long-term care home operators are responsible for setting their own visitor policy and may restrict the number of visitors per resident based on available space and applicable guidance and laws. However, there are no provincially set limits on the number of individuals permitted to visit for indoor or outdoor gatherings.

10. Are visitors still permitted when the home is in outbreak?

Only essential visitors are permitted when there is an outbreak in a home or area of a home or when a resident has failed screening, is symptomatic or in isolation. Essential visitors include caregivers, support workers and people visiting very ill residents or residents receiving end of life care. For clarity, individuals such as maintenance workers, contractors, or engineers, who provide support to the critical operations of the home, including performing critical maintenance services necessary to comply with applicable laws, are considered support workers and permitted to enter a home during an outbreak.

General visitors are not permitted to visit residents indoors if the entire home is in outbreak or the resident is symptomatic or isolating under additional precautions. If only a portion of the home is in outbreak, residents unaffected by that outbreak may still have visitors both indoors and outdoors.

Please note that government inspectors with a statutory right of entry cannot be prohibited from entering the home, even when a home is in outbreak.

11. Are homes able to restrict visitors who are visiting a resident receiving end of life care?

No, homes are not to restrict visitors who are attending the home to visit a resident receiving end of life care. In the event that the visitor(s) fail the home's screening process, or may not meet an individual home's vaccination or asymptomatic screen testing policy, the visitor(s) is to wear appropriate and applicable personal protective equipment as recommended by the organization's IPAC guidelines or best practice guidance for their sector.

Asymptomatic Screen Testing

12. Can homes continue conducting asymptomatic screen testing?

The Minister's Directive and Guidance Document set out minimum requirements and homes may choose to implement their own asymptomatic screen testing policies; however, it is not recommended at this time. In addition, policies must not apply to outdoor visitors, those visiting residents who are receiving end-of-life care or to inspectors with a statutory right of entry.

13. Are homes required to provide asymptomatic screen testing data to the ministry?

The ministry no longer requires homes to collect or submit weekly asymptomatic screen testing data.

Vaccinations

14. Could homes implement their own vaccination policies?

With the high vaccine uptake among residents, the availability of safe and effective antivirals, and high immunity in the general community, the risk of severe outcomes to residents has significantly decreased.

As the province transitions into a “new normal” state of ongoing COVID-19 transmission, LTC homes that have retained their proof-of-vaccination requirements are strongly recommended to revisit their policies, with consideration to the current context of the pandemic and the [Residents’ Bill of Rights](#), including the residents’ right to receive visitors of their choice. Specifically, while continuing to promote the uptake of boosters, homes are encouraged to consider permitting entry to visitors and qualified staff, regardless of their vaccination status. Licensees should engage with their residents’ council, family council, and local public health unit to inform the review of their policies to ensure revisions are supported by the most current clinical evidence. Licensees are also encouraged to seek independent legal advice as appropriate.

Long-term care licensees continue to retain the ability to impose vaccination requirements for existing and new staff, students, volunteers, support workers, caregivers and general visitors provided they are consistent with the [Fixing Long-Term Care Act, 2021](#), including the [Residents’ Bill of Rights](#) and section 5 (right to a safe and secure home), as well as [O. Reg. 246/22](#) under the Act, and comply with all other applicable laws including the [Human Rights Code](#).

However, vaccination requirements shall not apply to residents. For clarity, homes cannot deny admission to a resident due to their vaccination status. In addition, vaccination policies must not apply to outdoor visitors, children under the age of five, or to those visiting residents who are receiving end-of-life care.

Any licensee who developed vaccine requirements would be responsible for updating the policies and reviewing them going forward (for example, requiring existing and/or new staff be up to date with all recommended COVID-19 doses). For more information on recommended doses of COVID-19 vaccine, please review the Ministry of Health’s [COVID-19 Vaccine Guidance](#).

Contact Information

15. I have questions regarding the Health Data Collection Services portal. Who can I contact?

For questions regarding data collection and the Health Data Collection Services Portal please contact askhealthdata@ontario.ca.

16. Who can I contact if I have any issues?

Please send questions about pandemic response in long-term care homes to MLTCpandemicresponse@ontario.ca.

For inquiries about ordering testing and PPE supplies, please contact SCO.Supplies@ontario.ca.

For inquiries related to laboratory-based testing, please contact Ontario Health at lrc.testing@ontariohealth.ca.