

COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) Places of Worship

COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship

September 15, 2020 Version 6.0

On July 30, 2020, Southwestern Public Health issued a letter of instruction to businesses and organizations, including places of worship to implement mandatory face coverings in all enclosed public spaces in Oxford County, Elgin County and the City of St. Thomas. Employees and volunteers must also wear a face covering in enclosed employee spaces if physical distancing is not possible. Businesses and organizations had a one-week grace period to prepare and train staff. All policies were required to be in place by 12:00 a.m. on August 6, 2020. Here are [additional details](#) and [FAQ](#) about this Letter of Instruction.

Key Points

- As of August 6, 2020, the use of face coverings is required in all indoor public spaces.
 - As of July 17, 2020, the Southwestern Public Health region entered Stage 3 of reopening, marking the loosening of some earlier restrictions within places of worship.
 - 30 per cent of the capacity of a particular room for services and ceremonies remains the same.
 - Organized or spontaneous **indoor gatherings** can occur to a maximum of 50 people.
 - Organized or spontaneous **outdoor gatherings** can occur to a maximum of 100 people.
 - 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 reflects the current need for protection from COVID-19 in Ontario. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, and this guidance is subject to change. Please visit the Southwestern Public Health website www.swpublichealth.ca regularly for updates and additional information.

General Considerations

Mandatory Face Coverings

As of August 6, 2020, the use of face coverings is required in all indoor public spaces, as per a Southwestern Public Health 'Letter of Instruction'. Faith organizations are required to develop a

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[policy and protocols on the wearing of face coverings](#). Here are [additional details](#) and [FAQ](#) about this Letter of Instruction.

Please note: As part of this Letter of Instruction on face coverings, item 9 states that “where sufficient barriers are provided for employees/volunteers that protect the persons from close contact from a member of the public, a face covering is not required for the employee/volunteer, but is required for the member of the public”. All faith leader (employee) or a volunteer (e.g. someone reading a scripture, a single soloist) must wear a face covering, unless behind an impermeable barrier (e.g. Plexiglass) that is at least 2 metres back from the congregation. Everyone else in the place of worship must keep their face covering on.

In addition to mandatory face coverings, all places of worship **must** adhere to the following requirements:

- People gathering indoors for religious services, rites or ceremonies, and wedding ceremonies or funeral services, can fill up to **30 per cent of the capacity** of the particular room.
- Organized or spontaneous **indoor gatherings** (e.g., fundraisers, funeral receptions) can occur to a maximum of 50 people.
- Organized or spontaneous **outdoor gathering** (e.g., garden party, wedding reception) can occur to a maximum of **100 people**.
- In all cases, individuals are required to continue to maintain **physical distancing of at least 2 metres** with people from outside their household or [social circle](#).
- People at their place of work (e.g., faith leaders, paid office staff), **do not** count towards gathering limits.
- Indoor gathering limits apply to events that are fully or partially indoors. Indoor events and gathering cannot be combined with an outdoor event or gathering to increase the applicable gathering size.
- Adapt or suspend all indoor singing and the use of wind instruments – See “Singing and Musical Instrument” section below for more information.
- 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.
- 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.

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- Plan how to ensure physical distancing by calculating 30% of the capacity of the available space for any religious services, rites or ceremonies. This is the maximum number of participants allowed. The reduced capacity number includes all participants except children under two years of age and people at their place of work.
- 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 schedule of services 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 mixing of different individuals/families.
- Plan how to control movement into and out of your facility, and within the space to ensure a two-metre distance. Separate entrances and exits may not be necessary as participants usually enter and exit within distinct time periods.
- Discourage movement against the flow of people moving in the space. It may be necessary to mark off two-metre distances outside and/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 prior to opening.**
- Discontinue use of holy water stoup.
- Develop a schedule for increased routine cleaning and disinfecting.
- Consider installing a non-permeable barrier (e.g., Plexiglass) that is at least two metres from the congregation for the faith leader or designated volunteer to stand behind to deliver their service/reading without a face covering.

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 get tested and stay home.

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- Public health will advise of 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, [proper use of non – medical masks](#) and how to clean reusable masks or discard single use masks appropriately (see face covering section above).

Print and Post Signs

- COVID-19 self-assessment [visitor's sign](#) should be posted at all entrances.
- Anyone with [COVID-19 symptoms](#) or who has been in contact with someone with COVID-19 is not permitted to enter.
- [Handwashing](#) signs should be posted in high visibility areas.
- [Face covering signs](#).

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

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.

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- 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 be able to 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 using a mask.**
- 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 prayer and 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 that are returned or accessed within the setting are disinfected or not re-used immediately.
- 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 use of appropriate personal protective equipment.
- Discontinuing communion is strongly recommended at this time. Discontinue 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 (70-90% alcohol concentration). Avoid access to hand sanitizer by young children without supervision.
- Encourage good respiratory etiquette. Cover mouth and nose with elbow when coughing or sneezing, even when wearing a mask for added protection.

Singing and Playing Musical Instruments

- Singing, loud speech or the use of wind instruments can generate aerosol and respiratory droplets which 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 placed behind an impermeable barrier that is at least 2 metres from the congregation OR without a barrier, at least 4 metres

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- from the congregation is recommended. A soloist behind an impermeable barrier may temporarily remove their face covering while singing.
- 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 or social circle) to the greatest extent possible (minimum 2 metres, preferably 4 metres).
- In accordance with the Letter of Instruction for face coverings, a singer is required to wear a face covering unless behind an impermeable barrier. Individuals playing wind or brass instruments can temporarily remove their face covering and should 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 or **social circle**.
- Do not share microphones. Clean and disinfect microphones according to manufacturer's instructions after each use.

Enhanced Cleaning and Disinfection

- It is important 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 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 requirement for use of mask and gloves.
- Ensure adequate ventilation when using products (e.g. open windows, doors, or use fans).
- 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 minimum twice daily, and when visibly dirty.
- Ensure washrooms are always stocked with liquid soap and paper towel. Antibacterial soap is not required to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- Wash hands with soap and water immediately after cleaning.

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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 or **social circle** 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 is encouraged to wear a mask.

Weddings and Funerals

If a wedding, funeral, or other ceremony is occurring within a place of worship, then the maximum number of participants is still 30% of the capacity of the building. If, however, 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 or social circle (i.e. if the outdoor space is small it may not be able to accommodate 50 people while continuing to practice physical distancing). For indoor events, face coverings are required. For outdoor events, face coverings are required if individuals are not able to physically distance. Face coverings may be removed briefly for photos.

The maximum number of people allowed to attend wedding and funeral receptions is limited to 50 people for indoor gatherings and 100 people for outdoor gatherings. Those attending the reception must also follow proper health and safety advice, including physical distancing from people who are not from the same household or social circle. We recommend that you contact your venue regarding current practices that are acceptable for your reception during COVID-19.

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

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- 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, must be changed between tasks and frequently, with handwashing between uses.
 - Encourage frequent handwashing using the correct technique and to 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](#)