

COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) Places of Worship

COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship

June 28, 2021

Version 17.0

Key Points


- Some requirements for Places of Worship will vary depending on our region's current step level within the provinces [Roadmap to Reopen](#) plan.
- Staff must be screened for symptoms of COVID-19 before each shift and reminded to stay home and get tested if they are sick or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. Visitor screening (passive) is required (e.g., posting a [sign](#) at the entrance).
- All Places of Worship must develop a [COVID-19 workplace safety plan](#) and must post it in a conspicuous location.
- All staff, volunteers and worshippers must wear a face covering when in the indoor area of a place of worship.
 - Staff and/or volunteers working in employee-only spaces who can distance themselves from all other staff members in that space do not need to mask while in this area.
- 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, even while singing or delivering a service.
- All other general public health measures, including physical distancing (even when wearing a face covering), hand hygiene and enhanced cleaning, remain critical to reducing the spread of COVID-19 infections.

The COVID-19 pandemic is evolving rapidly. This guidance is subject to change. Please visit the Southwestern Public Health website (<https://www.swpublichealth.ca/>) regularly for updates and announcements. This guidance is to support owners/operators on how to keep places of worship operating safely and includes mandated restrictions and capacity limits in place in Ontario's [Roadmap to Reopen](#). Timelines for the start of each step of the roadmap are subject to change based on provincial direction.



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COVID-19 Roadmap to Reopen

Places of Worship must follow the requirements outlined in Ontario's [Roadmap to Reopen](#). The below chart provides an overview of restrictions in place in each step of the Roadmap. More details on the specific requirements in Step 3 are pending the release of the associated regulations.

Step in Roadmap	Requirements
<p>General Public Health Measures for all Businesses and Organizations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Workplaces must screen all workers and essential visitors entering the work environment. See the COVID-19 Screening Tool for Workplaces for more information ✓ Personal Protective Equipment that provides protection of the eyes, nose and mouth is required if a worker is required to come within 2 metres of another person who is not wearing a face covering and is not separated by Plexiglass or some other impermeable barrier. ✓ All businesses or facilities must limit capacity so that every member of the public is able to maintain two metres of physical distance from every other person. ✓ All businesses or organizations must post signs at all entrances to the premises in a conspicuous location visible to the public that inform individuals on how to screen themselves for COVID-19 prior to entering the premises. ✓ Businesses or places that are open shall ensure that equipment, washrooms, locker rooms, change rooms and showers that are accessible to the public are cleaned and disinfected as frequently as is necessary to maintain a sanitary condition. ✓ Face coverings are required to be worn by members of the public and workers in indoor public places and workplaces, with limited exceptions. ✓ All workplaces must develop a COVID-19 workplace safety plan and have it available should an inspector or compliance officer request to see it during an inspection. ✓ Food and beverages may be served to attendees of an event/social gathering within monitored facilities, provided all public health measures are strictly adhered to (please see the food and beverages section below, and our Food Premises Guidance document for more information).
<p>Step 1</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gathering limits for in-person religious services, rites or ceremonies, including wedding services and funeral services (applies in any venue other than a private dwelling): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% capacity indoors • For outdoors, capacity limits adjust to allow for the number of people that can maintain two metres of physical distance (small space fewer people; large space, more people). This does NOT apply to social gatherings associated with these services, such as receptions. • Physical distancing must be maintained

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gathering limits for social gatherings or organized public events: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more than 10 people outdoors. • Indoor gatherings are not permitted • Physical distancing must be maintained ✓ Virtual and drive-in events and religious services, rites or ceremonies are permitted (see below for details).
<p style="text-align: center;">Step 2</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gathering limits for in-person religious services, rites or ceremonies, including wedding services and funeral services (applies in any venue other than a private dwelling): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25% capacity indoors • For outdoors, capacity limits adjust to allow for the number of people that can maintain two metres of physical distance (small space fewer people; large space, more people). This does NOT apply to social gatherings associated with these services, such as receptions. • Physical distancing must be maintained ✓ Gathering limits for social gatherings or organized public events: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more than 25 people outdoors. • No more than 5 people indoors. • Physical distancing must be maintained ✓ Virtual and drive-in events and religious services, rites or ceremonies are permitted (see below for details).
<p style="text-align: center;">Step 3</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gathering limits for in-person religious services, rites or ceremonies, including wedding services and funeral services (applies in any venue other than a private dwelling): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger indoor services permitted (more information pending). • For outdoors, capacity limits adjust to allow for the number of people that can maintain two metres of physical distance (small space fewer people; large space, more people). This does NOT apply to social gatherings associated with these services, such as receptions. • Physical distancing must be maintained ✓ Gathering limits for social gatherings or organized public events: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger indoor and outdoor gatherings and organized public events with size limits (more information pending). ✓ Virtual and drive-in events and religious services, rites or ceremonies are permitted (see below for details).

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

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Guidance for Step Two of the Roadmap to Reopen

General Restrictions

- Adapt or suspend all indoor singing and the use of wind instruments – See the "Singing and Musical Instrument" section below for more information.
- Avoid opportunities for the virus to spread through touch, either directly or indirectly (i.e., through surfaces and objects, including objects that may be used in rituals or ceremonies). Use of any communal items that are shared but are difficult to clean and disinfect (e.g., bibles) should be limited. If used, hand hygiene should be performed immediately before and after use.
- Enhance cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces (i.e., pews, door handles, etc.).

Mandatory Face Coverings

The Province of Ontario has 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](#). According to our local Letter of Instruction, faith organizations are required to develop a policy and protocols on the wearing of face coverings. Here are [additional details](#) and [FAQs](#) about this Letter of Instruction.

Please note: Under the Ontario face covering regulation, everyone must wear a face covering at all times, even if behind a physical barrier. Face coverings are strongly recommended outdoors where physical distancing between members outside a person's household is difficult to maintain.

Preparing for Services

- 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.
- In **Step 2** of the Roadmap to Reopen, indoor services are allowed up to 25% capacity.
 - Calculate 25% of the available space's capacity for any religious services, rites or ceremonies using the following formula: Total square metres of floor area (accessible to the public, not including shelving and fixtures) ÷ 16. Round number down to nearest whole number.
 - This is the maximum number of participants allowed. The reduced capacity number includes all participants except 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 services' schedule to provide more frequent but smaller services.

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- 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.

Prevent COVID-19 Outbreaks

- Ensure you have an up-to-date attendance list of everyone who attended your place of worship in case someone attended while they were contagious.
- Options for an attendance list may include: keeping a record of online RSVPs; having a staff member observe and record names/contact information for each service; or having members sign in through a safe method (do not provide a pen, or have multiple pens with two containers clearly marked “sanitized” and “used”).
- If there is a case of COVID-19 who was contagious while attending services, public health will use the prepared 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 and call Telehealth, their health care provider, or an assessment centre for guidance about testing.
- Should there be a positive case, public health will advise any additional cleaning and disinfecting measures needed to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 in the setting.

Establish Policies for Staff 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 **online COVID-19 worker and employee screening** each time before starting their shift. Persons who become ill while in the service must go home right away, **self-isolate** and call Telehealth, their health care provider, or an assessment centre for guidance about testing.

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Training

Instruct staff and volunteers on proper hand hygiene techniques and respiratory etiquette, when and how to wear face coverings, and 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](#) must be posted at all entrances.
- [Handwashing](#) signs should be posted in high visibility areas.
- [Face covering signs](#) should be posted in high visibility areas and at all entrances.

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.

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 that is open 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). 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 the 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.

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- Rituals involving close physical contact (e.g., baptism, circumcision) or shared items (e.g., receptacles, washing facilities) are strongly discouraged as they may increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission. If they must be performed, considerations need to be made to provide them safely, including the mandatory personal protective equipment requirement of eye protection and medical mask for staff where physical distancing of 2 metres from the public cannot be maintained.
- 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.

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 at least 4 metres from the congregation and wearing a face covering during the performance is permissible. The province has mandated face coverings in indoor areas of businesses or organizations. While there are exemptions to the use of face coverings, there is no exemption for removing face coverings when behind an impermeable barrier. This means that soloists must wear a face covering while singing, even when behind a barrier.
 - Anyone playing a wind or brass instrument should be 2 metres from anyone else and separated by an impermeable barrier. If an impermeable barrier is not used, anyone playing a wind or brass instrument 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 a wind or brass instrument 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 the manufacturer's instructions after each use.

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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 masks and gloves.
- 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 toilet paper, 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.

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Food and Beverages

- In Step 2, food and beverages may not be served indoors.
- If food is served outdoors, a [Special Event Form](#) must be filled out at least 14 days prior.
 - Restrictions outlined in the [Food Premises Guidance Document](#) and the [Food Premises Regulation](#) must be followed.
 - Please note that special event forms do not need to be filled out if the organization is only serving coffee, tea, and non-hazardous baked goods to members of the congregation.
- 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](#)

[Food Premises Guidance Document](#)

[Guidance for Gathering Limits](#)

[Ont. Regulation 263/20 – Step 2 Restrictions](#)