

Ministry of Long-Term Care

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March 22, 2023

MEMORANDUM TO: Long-Term Care Licensees

FROM: Jeff Butler, Assistant Deputy Minister
Long-Term Care Operations Division

SUBJECT: Pandemic Response Update

Thank you for your unwavering commitment this winter to ensuring the health and safety of residents and staff in long-term care (LTC) homes.

Both the province and the LTC sector navigated a challenging respiratory illness season without requiring additional public health measures beyond those currently in place. As we approach the end of the respiratory illness season, we anticipate that COVID-19 is likely to fluctuate around the current level of activity and that the risk of severe outcomes to residents has been reduced with the high vaccine uptake among residents and availability of safe and effective therapeutics. As such, it is time to recalibrate our current response measures.

The Ministry of Long-Term Care (MLTC) is working closely with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH) to normalize and embed effective COVID-19 response measures into routine operations, including winding down COVID-specific policies through a phased approach.

These changes will bring Ontario into alignment with other provinces across the country who have already made similar adjustments.

The first phase involves winding down measures for those living or working in LTC that are no longer appropriate or necessary. To give LTC homes time to communicate and implement these changes, the following changes will come into effect on **March 31, 2023**:

- **Asymptomatic Screen Testing:** With the widespread availability of vaccines and antivirals, adherence to the new Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) Standard, and the high levels of immunity in the general community, there is no evidence to support the need for ongoing asymptomatic screen testing requirements. As such,

the ministry will no longer require asymptomatic screen testing for staff, students, volunteers, support workers, caregivers and visitors. In addition, the ministry will no longer require homes to collect and maintain statistical information of asymptomatic screen testing. While LTC homes still have the option to implement their own asymptomatic screen testing policies, it is not recommended at this time. Free rapid antigen tests will remain available until June 2023.

- **Outdoor Masking:** The ministry is removing the recommendation for residents, caregivers and visitors to mask outdoors. Masking will remain in place for staff outdoors when in close proximity to a resident for the time being and all indoor masking requirements will remain in place at this time.
- **Resident Screening and Daily Temperature Checks:** LTC 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. However, measures which go beyond what is required under the IPAC Standard, including daily temperature checks for COVID-19, will no longer be 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. Further, homes will no longer be required to actively screen residents returning from an absence.
- **Visitor Screening:** While passive screening requirements for staff, visitors and caregivers continue, the active screening recommendation for visitors and caregivers will be 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.
- **Visitors During Outbreaks:** The limit of one caregiver at a time during a COVID-19 outbreak, or when a resident is symptomatic or isolating under Additional Precautions, will be removed. During an outbreak, LTC homes continue to be subject to public health unit (PHU) direction per the Ministry of Health's [COVID-19 Guidance: Long-Term Care Homes, Retirement Homes, and Other Congregate Living Settings for Public Health Units](#).
- **Activities / Physical Distancing:** As continuity of social and physical activities is essential to the mental health and wellbeing of residents, LTC homes will be able to hold activities without adjusting to optimize for physical distancing. LTC homes, with guidance from PHUs, are best positioned to structure activities based on staff capacity and their individual LTC home and resident populations.
- **COVID-19 Vaccination:** Thanks to the sector's collaborative efforts, as of March 14, 2023, 78.4% of eligible residents have received the fall bivalent COVID-19

booster. The risk of severe outcomes to residents has significantly decreased due to the high level of vaccine uptake, the availability of safe and effective antivirals, and high immunity in the general community. 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 inform the review of their policies.

- **COVID-19 Daily Outbreak Reporting:** To reduce reporting burden on long-term care homes, homes will no longer be 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, as well as to report suspected or confirmed cases of diseases of public health significance or communicable diseases to their PHU as required under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*.

Additionally, we have heard that some homes are requiring a negative COVID-19 test upon transfer of residents from the hospital to the LTC home. Please note that testing is **not recommended nor required** for this transfer to occur. Please refer to the [COVID-19 Guidance: Long-Term Care Homes, Retirement Homes, and Other Congregate Living Settings for Public Health Units](#) regarding requirements for admissions and transfers.

The ministry will continue to work closely with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health to monitor the pandemic to keep homes safe for residents and staff.

To support the changes outlined above, please find the following enclosed updated: COVID-19 guidance document for long-term care homes in Ontario, 'What Residents Can Expect' handout, and the Frequently Asked Questions. The link to the [guidance document](#) will be updated on **March 31, 2023**.

The ministry will also hold webinars over the next two weeks for LTC home operators as well as for residents, families and caregivers. Webinar details and links will be shared on LTChomes.net.

Thank you again for your ongoing and tireless efforts, which have been critical for keeping residents safe while ensuring high quality of care within LTC homes.

As always, should you have questions you may contact us at MLTCPandemicResponse@ontario.ca.

Sincerely,



Jeff Butler
Assistant Deputy Minister
Long-Term Care Operations Division

Attachments: COVID-19 Guidance Document for long-term care homes in Ontario,
'What Residents Can Expect' Handout, FAQs

- c: Nancy Matthews, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Long-Term Care (MLTC) and
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility (MSAA)
Dr. Catherine Zahn, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health (MOH)
Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health, MOH
Alison Blair, Associate Deputy Minister, Health Integration and Partnerships,
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Michael Hillmer, Assistant Deputy Minister, Digital and Analytics Strategy, MOH
Matthew Anderson, President and CEO, Ontario Health
Lisa Levin, Chief Executive Officer, AdvantAge Ontario
Donna Duncan, Chief Executive Officer, Ontario Long Term Care Association
Lindsay Jones, Association of Municipalities of Ontario
Michael Jacek, Association of Municipalities of Ontario
Michael Sherar, President and CEO, Public Health Ontario
Cynthia Martineau, CEO, Home and Community Care Support Services
Dr. Rhonda Collins, President, Ontario Long Term Care Clinicians
Samantha Peck, Executive Director, Family Councils Ontario
Dee Tripp, Executive Director, Ontario Association of Residents' Councils