

COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship

July 16th, 2021 – Step 3

Owners, operators, and organizers of places of worship are responsible for complying with the provisions set out in the applicable Regulation(s) under the [Reopening Ontario \(A Flexible Response to COVID-19\) Act, 2020](#). As well, the Ontario government has released the [Roadmap for Reopening](#) that has three steps of public health measures: **Step 1**, **Step 2**, and **Step 3**. This guidance document describes the Provincial requirements that all places of worship must comply with, as well as local recommendations to reduce the risks of transmission in the area served by Peterborough Public Health (PPH).

Please note that religious ceremonies, rites and/or ceremonies must also comply with the requirements set out by the Provincial [Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Advice: Religious Services, Rites or Ceremonies](#) and [O. Reg. 364/20](#) (the Rules for Step 3).

This document does not constitute legal advice and does not replace the need for places of worship to follow all applicable requirements from the Province of Ontario. There may be situations where provincial rules and local public health rules vary in level of restriction. When this is the case, places of worship must ensure compliance with the measure that is most restrictive in terms of preventing the spread of COVID-19. It is important to recognize that the COVID-19 situation is evolving very quickly. As such, PPH's guidance is subject to change as new information is received. Please visit the [PPH COVID-19 website](#) for up-to-date information, including the current status of enhanced measures in Peterborough.

Before any Place of Worship opens, a [safety plan](#) must be developed to ensure all relevant public health guidelines and requirements are in place to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19. The guidance in this document will help with the creation of your safety plan. The final plan may be requested by any indoor/outdoor facility users, and should be shared with all relevant employees, volunteers, and participants (worshippers, congregants, staff, volunteers, etc.).

Places of Worship, faith leaders and attendees all have a responsibility to assess the risks associated with in-person services, and to develop plans to mitigate these risks.

Please note:

- Occupancy limits are maximums, and are permitted provided the organizer/faith leader can ensure physical distancing of at least 2 metres (6 feet) between households
- Indoor events or gatherings cannot be combined with outdoor events or gatherings so as to increase the applicable limit on the number of people at the event or gathering

COVID-19 transmission and Places of Worship

Respiratory viruses, like COVID-19, spread through respiratory droplets and aerosols from an infected individual when they speak, cough, sneeze, sing, shout, etc. Respiratory droplets are larger than aerosols and fall more quickly. Aerosols are smaller particles that can remain suspended in the air for some time. COVID-19 can spread from person to person by:

- Breathing in droplets or aerosols from the infected person's nose and throat secretions after they cough, sneeze, laugh, sing, or shout.
- Touching an object or surface with the virus droplets on it, then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes before washing your hands.
- Personal contact with the infected individual such as shaking hands, hugging, or kissing.

The highest risk of transmission is generally close (2-metres and under), unprotected contact with the infected individual. There is a lower risk of transmission with longer distances greater than 2-metres. Long distance transmission only occurs under certain conditions, including:

- [Poor ventilation](#), or recirculation of unfiltered or untreated air.
- Long exposure time.
- A high viral load.
- Specific activities promoting increased exhalation/expulsion such as singing, exercising, and shouting.
- Lack of masking.

Capacity limits for Places of Worship

Weddings, funerals and religious services, rites and ceremonies (does not apply to receptions or associated social gatherings)

- Indoor and outdoor: Capacity limited based on the ability to permit physical distancing of 2 metres
 - For the rite ceremony or service, there are no capacity limits provided that there is room to physically distance
 - If your place of worship is used for other purposes (meeting space, recreation, etc. capacity limits specific to the activity would apply)
- An associated social gathering or reception is subject to the restrictions in "Social gatherings and organized public events" unless it is held at a meeting or event space or a food or drink establishment (in which case it would be subject to the rules specific to those facilities)
- All persons attending the wedding, funeral, religious service, rite or ceremony must comply with public health guidance on physical distancing

Social events associated with your Place of Worship

Social activities that would occur before, during, or after faith-based activities such as communal lunches, dinners with food and beverage service, or simple coffee and tea platters are considered higher risk activities must be adapted at this time (i.e. buffet style service is not permitted).

- If held, these activities are subject to the current [social gathering limits](#), and at least 2 metres (6 feet) of physical distancing is required.
 - 25 people would be permitted indoors for a social gathering
 - 100 people would be permitted outdoors for a social gathering
- Public/social gathering limits are different than the limits permitted for religious services, rites, and ceremonies.
- There is a separate set of rules for the receptions and social gatherings associated with a rite ceremony or service. [That information is available here.](#)

Face coverings or masks required in Places of Worship

As per the applicable Provincial regulations, masks or face coverings are required in all public indoor settings across Ontario, as well as all indoor areas including those not accessible to the public where physical distancing of at least 2-meters (6 feet) cannot be maintained. This includes Places of Worship.

According to the regulation, every person who enters or remains in an enclosed public space shall wear a well-fitting mask in a manner that covers their mouth, nose, and chin.

- Look for 3-layered masks (2 layers of tightly woven cloth inside and outside, and a filter-type fabric, such as non-woven polypropylene fabric in between)
- Well-fitting 2-layer cloth masks made of tightly woven materials may still be used, since they work almost as well, especially to block your own respiratory droplets from others
- As you replace or add to your cloth masks, choose 3 layered masks
- It is also strongly recommended that all individuals wear a mask in outdoor spaces where physical distancing may become a challenge or not possible.

Operators of an enclosed public space must ensure that:

- Anyone not wearing a mask is given a verbal reminder to do so
- At every public entrance/exit there should be [signage](#) that states all persons entering the premises must wear a mask

A summary of provincial requirements can be found [here](#).

Rules that apply to individuals:

Masks or Face coverings required when:

- Indoors in a business or organization
- Attending an indoor organized public event and are within two metres of another person who is not a part of the same household
- The face covering or mask must cover the mouth, nose and chin
- Limited exceptions apply

Rules that apply to all businesses and organizations that are open:

- Any person (including faith leaders) in an indoor area of a business or organization or a vehicle that is a part of the business or organization must wear a mask or face covering that covers their mouth, nose or chin, with limited exceptions
- Not required for workers who are in an area that is not accessible to the public and are able to maintain physical distancing of 2 metres

For more information about masks, please visit www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/covid-19-mandatory-face-coverings/

Physical distancing

Required when:

- Indoors at a business or facility that is open to the public
- Attending an indoor organized public event
- Lining-up and congregating outdoors

- Patrons outside a business or place that is open must be managed to ensure they maintain a physical distance of 2 metres

Suggestions on increasing ability to physically distance:

- Consider offering multiple services and opportunities to worship to reduce the size of attendance.
- If multiple services are held on a single day, the start and end times should allow those who attend one service to exit safely, avoiding contact with those arriving for the next service. Time should also be allotted to clean and disinfect common surfaces between services.

Screening of patrons, worshipers and employees

- [Active screening of workers required](#)
- [Passive screening of patrons required](#) (i.e., posting signs at all entrances in a conspicuous location that informs individuals on how to screen themselves for COVID-19 prior to entry)

Consider developing a system to RSVP attendance to specific services or events. This may also allow online screening of attendees at the same time.

- To support public health contact tracing efforts in the event that an attendee at the place of worship tests positive, places of worship should keep up to date attendance log for individuals who attend their services or enter the facility, including names, contact information (phone number), times and dates. Places of worship should be prepared to contact attendees with further guidance from Peterborough Public Health in event of an exposure to COVID-19.

Regular childcare and children's programming

Any childcare and children's programming should operate in a manner generally consistent with the [Ministry of Health's COVID Guidance: Summer Day Camps](#). (There are some obvious exceptions to this guidance i.e. around length of time the programming must last, however, the general requirements apply).

Safety plans

[Safety plans](#) must be prepared, posted in a conspicuous location, and made available upon request

Things to consider adding to your safety plan:

- Please review the [Roadmap for Reopening](#) to determine building and/or outdoor capacity limits
- Places of worship must evaluate their own spaces to ensure that occupancy maximums can still ensure the maintenance of at least 2 metres (6 feet) of physical distancing between households
- Operators who choose to have in-person services should consider that capacity restrictions on their own do not address many important factors that may contribute to the spread of COVID-19.
 - Other factors include: entry, hallway, exit space and flow; the size and shape of the building where congregation is expected to occur; the layout of spaces where attendees will spend time; the activity occurring at each gathering; ventilation of the area, screening of participants; and cleaning procedures.
- Only allow one point of entry and a separate point of exit, especially if there will be overlap between people entering and exiting. However, for big buildings that may have a large number of attendees, the risk of crowding may need to be mitigated by exercising greater control of entrance and exit processes (e.g., dismiss one row at a time); and/or using more than one entrance and exit.

- If using more than one point of entry, facilities need to coordinate between doors to ensure no more than the maximum occupancy is admitted into the building.
- The distancing of a least 2 metres (6 feet) must be maintained in all phases of approaching, entering, and being in the building, including hallways.
- Weather permitting, prop entry and exit doors open to prevent patrons from touching handles/bars.
- Weather permitting, ventilate spaces by opening doors, windows etc.
- Hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol content should be available at facility entrances and exits and available in every room (as applicable).
 - All visitors should be asked to clean their hands upon entry and exit.
- Mark seating to ensure at least 2 metres (6 feet) of physical distancing between individuals who are not members of the same household.
- Mark directional flow of people through buildings and areas to maintain distancing and to avoid movement against the flow of people.
- Block off (if appropriate) and have visual markings on the ground, where attendees, staff and volunteers may be sitting or standing.
- Manage access to washrooms in a way that promotes physical distancing and cleaning and disinfection. Ensure washrooms are well stocked with liquid soap and paper towels, and that warm running water is available. In washrooms with multiple sinks, consider blocking access to every second sink to ensure physical distancing.
- Reconsider use of any communal items (e.g., shared glasses, dishes, etc.).
- Places of worship who offer free or rented spaces to other groups or businesses must ensure these groups or businesses also abide by this guidance and other Ontario requirements.

Singing and playing of brass and wind instruments

Singing in a choir and playing brass and wind instruments are higher risk activities for COVID-19 transmission. If singing or playing brass and wind instruments are going to take place, PPH recommends the following precautions:

- Consider using audio or video recordings instead of live singing or wind or brass instrumental music.
- Group singing is strongly discouraged. However, if more than one person is singing, limit the number of people singing to the fewest possible.
- Anyone singing or playing wind or brass instruments should be at least 2 metres (6 feet) from anyone else and separated by an impermeable barrier. If an impermeable barrier is not used, anyone singing or playing wind or brass instruments should be separated from any other person, including other performers, who are outside of the same household or essential supports, to the greatest extent possible (but at least 2 metres/6 feet).
- Performers should be spaced a minimum of 2 metres (6 feet) apart, but ideally more, and face away from each other if possible.
- Performers should be separated from each other by plexiglass or some other impermeable barrier unless the singers are within the same household or essential supports.
- Microphones and amplification should be used if possible, rather than projecting the voice.
 - Microphones should be sanitized between users

For more information about the risks of singing and playing music, please also review these documents:

- [Singing and Playing Wind Instruments – Environmental Scan related to COVID-19 \(publichealthontario.ca\)](https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/publichealth/COVID-19/Singing_and_Playing_Wind_Instruments_-_Environmental_Scan_related_to_COVID-19.pdf),
- [Aerosolization and airborne transmission](#) of COVID-19.

Managing COVID-19 at your Place of Worship

If two (2) or more people test positive for COVID-19 (e.g. two or more cases) are identified in connection with your workplace premise:

- Immediately notify Peterborough Public Health at (705) 743-1000 if there are two or more people that test positive for COVID-19 within a 14-day interval in connection with your workplace premises.
- Provide contact information for a designated contact person at the workplace premise and ensure that person is readily available to communicate with Peterborough Public Health and implement any additional measures immediately as required by Peterborough Public Health.
- Ensure that accurate and updated contact information for all workers is available to be produced to Peterborough Public Health within 24 hours of request from Peterborough Public Health in support of case management and contact tracing requirements for COVID-19.
- Notify the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development and/or other relevant government authorities. Further information about employer's responsibilities with respect to COVID-19 at: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-coronavirus-and-workplace-health-and-safety>.
- Cooperate with infection prevention and control personnel from Peterborough Public Health including allowing entry into the workplace premise for inspection, to support enhanced infection prevention and control measures and recommendations.

Cleaning and disinfecting

- Equipment, washrooms, locker rooms, change rooms, showers must be [cleaned and disinfected](#) as frequently as is necessary to maintain a sanitary condition
- Surfaces most likely to become contaminated include, but are not limited to: doorknobs, railings, elevator buttons, water fountain/cooler knobs, light switches, toilet and faucet handles, ceremonial objects, electronic devices, and tabletops. Refer to [Public Health Ontario's Environmental Cleaning fact sheet](#)
 - Only use cleaning and disinfectant products that have a [Drug Identification Number \(DIN\)](#); it should be stated on product packaging.
 - Check expiry dates of cleaning and disinfectant products used and always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Ensure that the products used are compatible with the item to be cleaned and disinfected.
- Garbage bins should be lined with plastic bags

Shared items

- Sharing or distributing materials or objects is considered to be an activity that increase the risk of disease transmission. This 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.
 - consider leaving objects or materials to be distributed on a table for individuals to pick up and/or 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.
- If it is required for religious or spiritual reasons, touching of ceremonial objects may occur if:

- hand hygiene is performed before and after touching the object.
- individuals must not kiss, embrace or press their faces on any shared ceremonial object
- Consider not handing out or sharing items that cannot be cleaned and disinfected before and after each use (e.g., books, hymns, prayer mats, head coverings, programs).
- Consider using projection or audio-visual systems to share information.
- Microphones should be set up once and then not touched by individual users, as these devices are difficult to clean and disinfect.
- Do not offer shared receptacles for liquid.
- Consider not passing donation collection plates or containers between attendees. Alternatives include: online offerings/donations; and a designated area to place offerings/donations. Touching of offerings/donations collected from patrons should be minimized for a period of three days.

Additional information

Please note that religious ceremonies, rites and/or ceremonies must also comply with the requirements set out by the Provincial [Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Advice: Religious Services, Rites or Ceremonies](#).

Other resources

Consider posting PPH's posters relevant to health and safety best practices:

- [STOP COVID-19 Screening Form/Poster](#)
- [STOP! Places of Worship \(Face Coverings Required\)](#)
- [STOP – Do you have](#) – (Visitors – Poster)
- [Face Covering BENEFITS](#)
- [Physical Distancing + Face Covering](#)
- [Protect Each Other – Mask](#)
- [How to SAFELY Wear a Cloth Mask or Face Covering](#)
- [How to WEAR-CLEAN Cloth Mask](#)
- [How to Safely Wear a Face Covering \(Do's & Don'ts\)](#)
- [Stop the Spread of Germs](#)
- [Using Hand Sanitizers Safely](#)

Likewise, if your Place of Worship is a workplace, you may find this 'workplace information' helpful:

<https://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-workplaces/>

This guidance is subject to change as new information is received. Plan to regularly check for new guidance as part of *your* COVID-19 plan.