

Ministry of Health

# Outbreak Guidance: Living Settings for Seasonal International Agri-Food Workers (IAWs)

Version 2.3 – June 2023

## Highlights of Changes:

- Updates to **case and contact management, screening, and testing** for IAWs
- Revised recommendations related to **attendance policies, physical distancing, cohorting, and health assessments**
- **Outbreak definition** updated

**This guidance document outlines best practices to support local public health units (PHU) and agri-food employers with minimizing disease transmission among individuals residing in employer-provided living settings, and to help prevent, detect, and manage individual cases within these settings.** PHUs may provide additional direction to help prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and/or other infectious diseases. Employers should check with their PHU regularly for information about local guidance or requirements that may apply.

The updates in this document are based on the scientific evidence and public health expertise available across Canada and abroad, and they are subject to change as the knowledge about COVID-19 evolves over time.

This document is not intended to take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, legal advice, or any other requirements that may apply to agri-food facilities. In the event of any conflict between this guidance document and any applicable legislation, the legislation shall prevail.

Please check the Ministry of Health's (MOH's) [Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario](#) and the [Ontario Public Health Standards: Infectious Diseases Protocol appendices](#) regularly for updates to other COVID-19 relevant information. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) has also created a "one stop shop" [toolkit](#) for farmers to access guidance, resources, and information related to prevention, control, testing, and outbreak management

supports. OMAFRA has also developed a [resources website for IAWs](#) consisting of information on available programs, worker rights, and safety.

OMAFRA has developed a voluntary [registry](#) of employers under the agricultural streams of the federal Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) to enhance its support of the agri-food sector. Employers who hire and provide housing for IAWs under the TFWP are encouraged to register. The registry aims to help employers keep workers safe and to ensure a healthy and successful growing season.

## Terms Used in this Document

- **“Worker”** refers to anyone conducting activities in agri-food facilities regardless of their employer or immigration status, which includes International Agricultural Workers (IAWs). This includes, but is not limited to:
  - Staff employed by agri-food facilities under the federal TFWP;
  - Temporary and/or agency staff;
  - External staff who are performing job duties (e.g., support services staff, contracted cleaning staff, tradespeople);
  - Domestic workers; and
  - Any other person who is employed to perform duties on the farm.
- For workers employed on the farm and who reside in their own dwellings in the community, refer to [the Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario document](#).
- **“Housing”** or **“employer-provided living settings”** or **“congregate living setting”** refers to accommodations both on-farm and in the community that is provided by the employer. It is recommended that PHUs consider both on-farm and community-based accommodations as being relevant to the Case and Contact Management and Testing sections of this guidance.
- A **“Suspected Outbreak”** is defined as:
  - One case (i.e., positive by PCR or rapid molecular or rapid antigen test) among a resident of an employer-provided living setting.
- An **“Outbreak”** is defined as:
  - Two cases (i.e., positive by PCR or rapid molecular or rapid antigen test) with an epidemiological link (i.e., no obvious source of infection in the agri-food

setting or employer provided living setting), within a 7-day period, where both cases are residents of an employer-provided living setting.

## Roles and Responsibilities

### Role of the Public Health Unit (PHU)

#### Case and Contact Management/Outbreak Management

- Receive reports of suspected or confirmed outbreaks of COVID-19 in accordance with the [Health Protection and Promotion Act, 1990](#) (HPPA).
- Manage cases and contacts in accordance with relevant [provincial guidance](#) and tools.
- Enter cases and outbreaks in the provincial surveillance system, in accordance with data entry guidance provided by Public Health Ontario (PHO).
- Determine if an outbreak exists and declare an outbreak, as per the outbreak definition.
- Provide guidance and recommendations for agri-food facilities and employer-provided housing on outbreak control measures.
- When required, make recommendations on who to test, in alignment with the guidance provided within this document (section on testing below) and the [Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario document](#), as applicable.
- Work with employers to promote the access of both RAT and PCR tests, vaccination services, and access to therapeutics as eligible.
- Declare the outbreak over.
- Information on the occupational health and safety requirements and workplace guidance for COVID-19 are available on the [Ontario COVID-19 and workplace health and safety website](#) and the [Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development \(MLITSD\) website](#).

## Prevention of Disease Transmission

COVID-19 is a virus that can spread through the respiratory particles of an infected person while breathing, talking, coughing, or sneezing. Infected people, with or without symptoms, can transmit COVID-19. The risk may be heightened as a result of working and/or living with others in close proximity, and where workers move between other agri-food facilities without adequate precautions.

In general, the risk of transmission is higher indoors than outdoors, especially in closed, crowded spaces for extended periods of time. These high-risk situations may occur during various activities within the agri-food sector, including but not limited to work, communal living, and transportation.

For additional details on prevention measures, please refer to Public Health Ontario's [How to Protect Yourself from COVID-19](#) factsheet and the [COVID-19 Guidance: Long-Term Care Homes, Retirement Homes, and Other Congregate Living Settings for Public Health Units](#) document.

## Vaccination

- **COVID-19 vaccination** is one of the most effective public health measures to prevent infection and severe outcomes including hospitalizations and death due to COVID-19. Please refer to Ontario's [COVID-19 Vaccine Guidance](#) for the recommended vaccination schedules.
  - New workers who are unvaccinated should be offered a complete series of COVID-19 vaccinations as soon as possible.
- PHUs are encouraged to support COVID-19 vaccinations in agri-food facilities in collaboration with relevant health system partners as feasible

## Passive Screening

- Employers are recommended to maintain passive screening through [signage](#) posted in the living setting.
- Additionally, it is recommended that workers residing in an employer-provided living setting consider the use of the [self-assessment tool](#).

**Note:** As much as possible, signage should be in the format and/or language that is most accessible to the workers and visitors of that setting. For examples, see [PHO's multilingual resources](#) or the [US Center for Disease Control's pictograph-based signage](#).

## Masking

- Masks are a way to minimize the risk of potentially infecting others, and can be an important layer of protection when COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses are circulating. See [Protection from COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses](#) for more information on masking recommendations. Additional consideration should be given to:

- Providing resources and training for workers and visitors on proper mask use (e.g., how to wear and remove a mask), as well as on safe use and limitations of masks. For additional information, see [The Government of Ontario's Face Coverings and Face Masks](#), [MLITSD's Using Masks in the Workplace](#), and [PHO's Optimizing the Use of Masks Against COVID-19 documents](#).

## Cleaning and disinfection

- For an easy to follow guide, check out [A 'Quick and Dirty' Guide to Cleaning & Disinfecting Surfaces on the Farm](#).
- For more information visit [Cleaning and Disinfection for Public Settings](#).

## Ventilation and Filtration

- see PHO's [Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning \(HVAC\) Systems in Buildings and COVID-19](#).
- Where ventilation is inadequate or mechanical ventilation does not exist, the use of [portable air cleaners](#) can help filter out aerosols.
- Ventilation and filtration are important for overall indoor air quality as they help to dilute or reduce respiratory droplets and aerosols in a given space. However, they do not prevent transmission in close contact situations and need to be implemented as part of a comprehensive and layered strategy against COVID-19.

## Testing

- IAWs in employer-provided living settings are considered a priority group for [symptomatic](#) PCR testing in accordance with the current [COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidelines](#).
- Please check the Ministry of Health's testing resources on our [website](#) for the most up to date provincial COVID-19 testing information.

## Case and Contact Management

- Case management decisions are made by the local PHU, guided by the [Ministry of Health's Public Health Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario](#) and other relevant [provincial guidance](#).
- All positive COVID-19 cases who reside in employer-provided living settings, regardless of whether they are symptomatic or asymptomatic, should be isolated immediately with symptom onset or positive test result if asymptomatic,

and isolate until symptoms have been improving for 24 hours (or 48 hours if gastrointestinal symptoms) and no fever present.

- In addition to self-isolation, for 10 days after symptom onset or positive test (whichever is earlier) they should:
  - Continue to wear a well-fitted mask in all public settings and avoid non-essential activities where mask removal is necessary (e.g., dining out where masks cannot be worn).
  - Within the shared accommodation, maintain physical distancing when masks are removed for eating, sleeping, other essential activities.
  - Avoid non-essential visits to anyone who is immunocompromised or at higher risk of illness (e.g., seniors) and avoid non-essential visits to highest risk settings such as hospitals and long-term care homes.

For close contacts of individuals who are a suspect or confirmed case, including those in an employer-provided living setting, they should:

- [Self-monitor](#) for any symptoms for 10 days after their last exposure and self-isolate and seek testing if they develop symptoms of COVID-19.
- Continue to wear a well-fitted mask in all public settings and avoid non-essential activities where mask removal is necessary (e.g., dining out where masks cannot be worn).
- Within the shared accommodation, maintain physical distancing when masks are removed for eating, sleeping, other essential activities.
- Avoid non-essential visits to anyone who is immunocompromised or at higher risk of illness (e.g., seniors) and avoid non-essential visits to highest risk settings such as hospitals and long-term care homes.
- Employers should have processes in place to ensure positive cases are reassessed regularly for new or worsening [symptoms of COVID-19](#) through access to community health care resources.
- When there is more than one case of COVID-19 in an agri-food setting and individuals reside in the same housing, determining close contacts may be difficult. In general, all workers who live in the same living setting should be considered close contacts, but PHUs will, if an outbreak has been declared, use their discretion based on living arrangement and structure.
  - Refer to outbreak definition provided in section above.

- For mental health supports during isolation, [ConnexOntario](#) provides telephone, text, chat, and e-mail assistance available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
  - Language supports are available in over 170 languages, including Mandarin, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Vietnamese, Greek, Polish, Russian, and Serbian.

## Isolation spaces

- In general, workers who live in the same housing should be considered close contacts, but PHUs will use their discretion when an outbreak has been declared based on household/living arrangements and structures.
- Isolation spaces are used for a suspect or confirmed case (i.e., positive by PCR or rapid molecular or rapid antigen test), especially if symptomatic. They are critical in preventing the transmission of COVID-19 and are important because both symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals infected with COVID-19 can spread the virus to others.
- For domestic workers employed on the farm and who reside in their own dwellings in the community, refer to the [Protection from COVID-19 and Other Respiratory Illnesses](#) website.

### For workers in employer-provided housing

- An isolation space is a room that allows an individual to self-isolate safely and comfortably.
- If the employer is providing housing for workers of an agri-food facility, the responsibility for securing the isolation spaces lies with the employer. Employers who do not provide housing for workers of their agri-food facility are not responsible for providing isolation spaces.
- Employers of an agri-food facility should anticipate the need for isolation spaces both on- and off-site (if isolation may not be safely achieved on-site).

## Declaring an Outbreak

- It is the role of the local PHU to investigate and assess possible COVID-19 outbreaks in the community, and to determine when to declare an outbreak. This will involve collaboration with the affected workplace agri-food facility and consideration of the workplace and any associated living settings.

- The local PHU is also responsible for making recommendations on who to test, in alignment with the [COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance](#) and based on PHU discretion for the purposes of investigating and responding to an outbreak, and facilitate a coordinated approach to testing, in collaboration with Ontario Health, including provision of an investigation or outbreak number.
- Additional guidance for outbreak control measures and roles of the employer, the local PHUs, MLITSD, and the MOH is available in the [COVID-19 Guidance: Long-Term Care Homes, Retirement Homes, and Other Congregate Living Settings for Public Health Units](#) document.
- Testing during an outbreak should follow the [COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance](#). When contacts are housed in alternative locations, processes should be in place to ensure contacts have access to repeat testing during their self-isolation as recommended by the local PHU.

## Return to Operations Following the Declaration of an Outbreak

Any return to operations should happen safely and in such a way that ongoing transmission is prevented. The principles articulated previously describing prevention strategies for COVID-19 transmission should continue to be followed by employers and workers during and after an outbreak.

- New or unexposed workers should not be introduced if an outbreak is ongoing, and until all recommended outbreak and prevention measures are in place.
- New workers should be trained on and adhere to all preventive measures reviewed in this document as well as any workplace policies on COVID-19 and worker health and safety.



## Appendix A: Public Health Ontario Resources

- **General:**
  - [Public Resources](#)
  - [COVID-19 Resources for Congregate Living Settings](#)
- **Infection Prevention and Control:**
  - [COVID-19 IPAC Fundamentals Training](#) (course)
  - [COVID-19 Checklist: Preparedness and Prevention in Congregate Living Settings](#)
  - [COVID-19 Checklist: Managing COVID-19 Outbreaks in Congregate Living Settings](#)
  - [COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Strategies for Community Congregate Living Settings](#)
  - [COVID-19: Personal Protective Equipment and Non-Medical Masks in Congregate Living Settings](#)
- **COVID-19 Outbreaks:**
  - [Cohorting in Outbreaks in Congregate Living Settings](#)
- **Respiratory Virus Outbreaks:**
  - [Planning for Respiratory Virus Outbreaks in Congregate Living Settings](#)
  - [Key features of influenza, SARS-CoV-2 and Other Common Respiratory Viruses](#)
- **Indoor air quality:**
  - [COVID-19: Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning \(HVAC\) Systems in Buildings](#)
  - [Use of Portable Air Cleaners and Transmission of COVID-19](#)
  - [Physical barriers for COVID-19 infection prevention and control in commercial settings](#)