



COMMUNICATION

ISSUE: Updated guidance on close contacts and self-isolation requirements, and COVID-19 variants of concern

On February 22, 2021, public health officials provided updated guidance on close contacts and self-isolation requirements. The below bulletin provides an overview of this guidance as well as information from public health officials on variants of COVID-19.

COVID-19 Variants of Concern

Variants of the COVID-19 virus are expected and are the result of mutations in the virus. There are, however, several new variants identified that have raised concerns because they may be more easily transmitted, associated with an increased risk of death compared to other variants (although the overall risk of death is still low), or result in decreased vaccine effectiveness. These are referred to as variants of concern (VOC).

COVID-19 VOC, such as those originating in the UK, South Africa, and Brazil, continue to spread globally. The first VOC, originally found in the United Kingdom, was detected in Canada in December 2020. Cases of COVID-19 due to VOC have been recently identified in Manitoba, although the numbers in the province are currently low.

Our knowledge and understanding of these variants is rapidly evolving. Manitoba's goal is to slow the introduction of VOC in the province, allowing for more time to immunize our population. As a result, changes have been introduced regarding how we manage cases and close contacts in order to further reduce the spread of all cases of COVID-19, including additional measures for VOC cases.

This includes stricter protocols when VOC cases are identified in schools.

Recommendations for Households with a Close Contact

In November 2020, public health officials advised that entire households must self-isolate while waiting for the COVID-19 test results of someone in their household. Exemptions were put in place for some critical professions.

On February 22, 2021, public health officials announced changes to the directive. In addition to self-isolating while a household member is awaiting COVID-19 test results, entire households now must isolate if a household member is deemed to be a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case. The reason for this change is to prevent transmission from contacts who are asymptomatic cases and prevent VOC from spreading in the community.

Close Contact Definition

The definition of a close contact has also changed to identify more contacts. A close contact is anyone who has been in close physical proximity (less than two metres or six feet) for more than a cumulative total of ten minutes to a confirmed COVID-19 case over the course of a day. It also includes people who provided care for the case or had direct contact with infectious body fluids without the use of personal protective equipment. All household members are considered close contacts. As well, a person would be considered a close contact if they had close face-to-face interactions with someone who has COVID-19 without the use of a mask, even if the interaction(s) were for less than a cumulative total of ten minutes.



Variants of Concern and Schools: If a VOC is identified in a case with school exposures, more aggressive measures for contacts will be implemented by public health officials. These officials will connect with the school and ensure all close contacts have been identified. In addition, the entire class or cohort(s) exposed to the case may be moved to remote learning for the duration of the quarantine and may be considered close contacts. Public health officials will advise on specific recommendations based on the school exposure.

Self-Isolation Requirements

It is recommended that close contacts go for testing 10 days after their last exposure to the case. Regardless of whether the close contact tests negative, they must complete their 14 days of self-isolation (quarantine); however, household members of the close contact can end their self-isolation (quarantine) when the close contact tests negative, as long as the test has been done a minimum of 7 days after the exposure.

If a close contact does not get tested for COVID-19, and the positive case is not a VOC, the household members of that person must isolate until the close contact completes the full 14 days of self-isolation (quarantine) and remains asymptomatic.

If the close contact is linked to a VOC case and the close contact chooses not to be tested, the close contact must self-isolate for 14 days, followed by an additional 10 days, for a total of 24 days. The rest of the household must also self-isolate for the entire 24 days.

Self-Isolation Exemptions for Household Members of Close Contacts or Individuals Awaiting Test Results

Public health officials have confirmed that critical services workers, which include Kindergarten to Grade 12 education providers (all teachers, administrators, and support staff), who have been directed to self-isolate because a member of their household is either awaiting a COVID-19 test result **OR** a member of their household has been deemed to be a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case, can continue to work as long as

1. they wear a medical mask at all times. Any breaks where the mask is removed should be done in isolation of staff and students
2. they have no symptoms themselves
3. the close contact, if the household member is a close contact, has no symptoms and is able to self-isolate within the home
4. the close contact is **not** linked to a VOC case

Note: Kindergarten to Grade 12 education providers (all teachers, administrators, and support staff) can continue working until the VOC outcome is known. There may be several days of delay between a case receiving a positive test result and confirmation that the positive test result was due to a VOC. These household members should still self-isolate when not at work.

These exemptions do not apply in situations where the staff person themselves is awaiting a COVID-19 test result or has been deemed to be a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case. In these situations, the staff must self-isolate—there are no exceptions. As well, staff with a household member who is a close contact of a person with a positive COVID-19 test due to a VOC are not exempt from these isolation measures.



Public health officials will also advise individuals on additional exemptions if someone has been fully immunized or has had a recent COVID-19 infection in the past three months.

Schools are reminded to review their school plans for staffing and remote learning implications.

RELEVANT WEB LINKS

Manitoba.ca COVID-19 Focus on the Fundamentals

<https://gov.mb.ca/covid19/fundamentals/variants.html>

For the most up-to-date information on the definition of Close Contacts and the Requirement for Self-Isolation and Household Isolation, see the following link:

www.gov.mb.ca/covid19/testing/monitoring/close-contacts.html#what-to-do

Please forward questions and inquiries to educovid19@gov.mb.ca.

Additional information is available on the Manitoba Education COVID-19 website at

www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/covid/latest.html.