

COVID-19 Q & A

Community spread is happening in our county! As our case numbers rise, our workload here at the Essex County Health Department has increased significantly. While we strive to be transparent, accurate, and timely with our information, our first priority is preventing further spread and keeping you safe and healthy.

Although we cannot meet all requests for additional information or answer all questions at this time, we will continue to try to address our most common questions, as time permits. See below for our most recent Q&A.

We're all tired of COVID, but we urge our residents to remain vigilant and:

- Wear a face mask.
- Keep physically distant (6 feet) from others.
- Wash hands often.
- Avoid crowds and gatherings.
- Stay home when sick.
- Get a flu shot.

Q: Who notifies me if I'm a contact of a COVID positive case?

A: COVID positive cases may reach out to their known close contacts to let them know of their exposure. Once the County Health Department interviews a case, the Health Department reaches out to contacts to interview and determine if they meet criteria for quarantine. Schools and employers may also communicate to their school communities and/or employees that they are going "on pause" or other changes to normal practices due to a case of COVID-19.

Q: How are people identified and quarantined if they're at a public place like a restaurant, church or party?

A: If the establishment maintains a log of patrons, congregants, or attendees, the health department would work off of that list to reach everyone and inform them of their exposure risk. If there is no log, or if there are questions about the completeness of existing logs, then the health department would issue a public notice informing the community of the exposure, listing the date(s) and time(s) in question.

Q: Why can schools, restaurants, bars and churches be open while we're also being told not to gather with our own families for holidays?

A: Schools, restaurants, bars, churches, and other businesses, while open, must comply with specific guidelines for mask wearing, distancing, facility capacity limits, and cleaning/disinfection practices. When we are home with our friends and family members, it's easier to let our guard down and assume that we are safe with our loved ones. Recent updates from the CDC warn that small, indoor gatherings are fueling the spread of the virus. Our Department confirms these types of exposures right here in Essex County are, in fact, fueling our local case counts. The executive order to limit home gatherings to 10 or fewer people is intended to protect our communities and ensure health system capacity to treat everyone needing health care through the holidays, and winter months ahead.

Q: I just found out I was exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID-19. Why hasn't the health department reached out yet?

A: We strive to (and have maintained) a standard of reaching every case within 24 hours and every contact of the case within 48 hours. Here is a breakdown of the process and why it can take a few hours (or more) for us to reach you:

- A single case investigation, depending on the complexity, can take anywhere from one hour, up to several hours to complete. The purpose of the case investigation is really threefold: issue isolation orders to prevent further spread, determine how the case may have been exposed, and identify the contacts exposed to the case. Some case investigations result in multiple contacts. Especially in the school environment or other congregate settings, where we err on the side of caution, we have seen one case lead to 30, 40 and 50 or more contacts.
- Each contact interview takes approximately 20 – 30 minutes. We are a small health department and even when we have assistance from additional staff, completing 50 interviews for one positive case takes hours. This is in addition to any other new cases we may have to work, which also have contacts to reach – and all of our daily monitoring of existing cases and contacts.
- When we have multiple contacts to reach, we try to give everyone an initial call to inform them that they were exposed, ask them to begin quarantining, and note that we will be reaching back out to complete the interview. Please be patient with us as we work through this process. If you receive a call/text from someone other than the health department informing you that you were exposed to COVID-19, please self-quarantine immediately (or as immediately as possible) and wait for further instructions from the health department. If you are concerned that you are not on our radar – or that you were identified as a contact in error, please call us at 518-873-3500.

Q: Why is only 1 person in a family under Quarantine? Shouldn't the whole house quarantine?

A: Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick. The quarantine order only applies to the individual that came in contact with the positive case. This is the only person with a known exposure to the virus. The quarantined individual should limit contact with others in the house, and monitor themselves closely for signs and symptoms of developing illness. Other household members who were not in contact with the positive case do not need to quarantine.

Should the quarantined contact become sick with COVID-19, the health department would then further isolate this person and quarantine all household members. Isolation separates sick people with a contagious disease from people who are not sick. Because the quarantined individual has been separated from the public and has had their movements restricted before they became ill, the number of additional people exposed to the virus is greatly reduced in most cases.

Q: Why am I under a Quarantine when I told the Health Department I wasn't within 6 feet or less for 10 minutes or more?

Using this time and space criteria is a great way to identify close contacts. Our staff are trained to conduct investigations. Interviews with cases are long (usually 60 minutes or more) and go through a meticulous accounting of days, time, places, people, activities, length of interactions, number of interactions and much more. There are many considerations when determining if someone meets criteria for Quarantining and our practice is to err on the side of caution. This process of quarantining works well and it's an important tool to preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Q: Does anyone check on people under a Health Order of Isolation or Quarantine to be sure they're staying home?

A: The health department conducts daily monitoring via phone call (isolation) or call/text (quarantine) for everyone issued a health order. If necessary, we direct our local Office of Emergency Services/Sheriff's Office to conduct well checks to ensure individuals are safe and able to maintain isolation/quarantine requirements.

Q: Why does the Health Department sometimes offer a testing event, but not always?

A: Our ability to offer testing events depends on the unique factors and circumstances associated with any one case or cluster of cases. Considerations include the type of contact/level of exposure risk such as time, space, and activities taking place at the time of exposure; resources; staff capacity; and access to local testing. We take every case and every situation seriously and respond to the very best of our capacity. This is good time to remember – testing is just one piece of COVID-19 response. Preventing exposure and reducing risk through ongoing social distancing, wearing masks and washing hands is our first line of defense.