

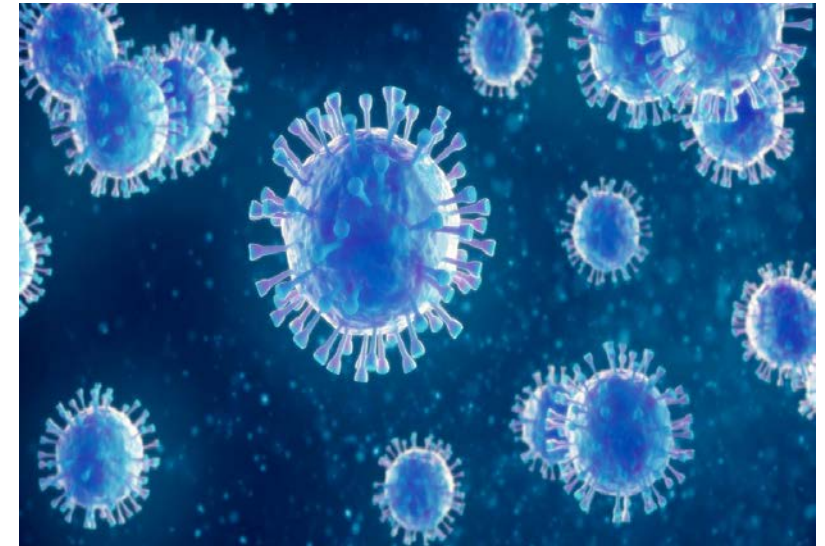
Confronting COVID-19

Understanding asymptomatic spread and necessary precautions

July 9, 2020, 11:00 AM

Questions about COVID-19 spread

- We know people with symptoms can pass it on if precautions are lacking.
- But what about people without symptoms?
- Can they unknowingly spread the disease?



What we will cover today

- Current information on asymptomatic spread
- Ontario's Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance document
- Workplace rights, duties and what we can do to prevent workplace infection
- But first, some basic facts about COVID-19 and what we know about how it spreads

What is COVID-19?

- SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19
- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2
- One person with COVID-19 infects 2.2 others
- One person with influenza can infect 1.3 others
- Some factors increase the risk of passing it on
 - Indoor activities, colder temperatures, noise requiring workers to shout, and heavy work that causes deep or rapid breathing (more on this later)



How is the virus transmitted?

- **Respiratory droplets** – until recently thought to be only when infected person coughs or sneezes
- Most droplets are large and fall to the ground
- **Aerosols and small droplets** generated during certain medical procedures, but emerging science says infected persons expel these too
- **Small droplets** – may stay suspended in the air
- **Contact** – if virus directly contacts the eyes, nose, mouth

Contaminated surfaces



- Also transmitted by contact with a contaminated surface
- Once respiratory droplets fall to a surface they can remain viable for several hours or days
- Workers can be infected if they touch eyes, nose, or mouth after contact with contaminated surface

What are the symptoms?

- Common – fever, dry cough and tiredness
- In some people, more severe symptoms like high fever, severe cough, and shortness of breath, which often indicates pneumonia
- Less common – aches and pains, nasal congestion, headache, sore throat, diarrhea, loss of taste or smell, skin rash or discolouration of fingers and toes



What about other symptoms?

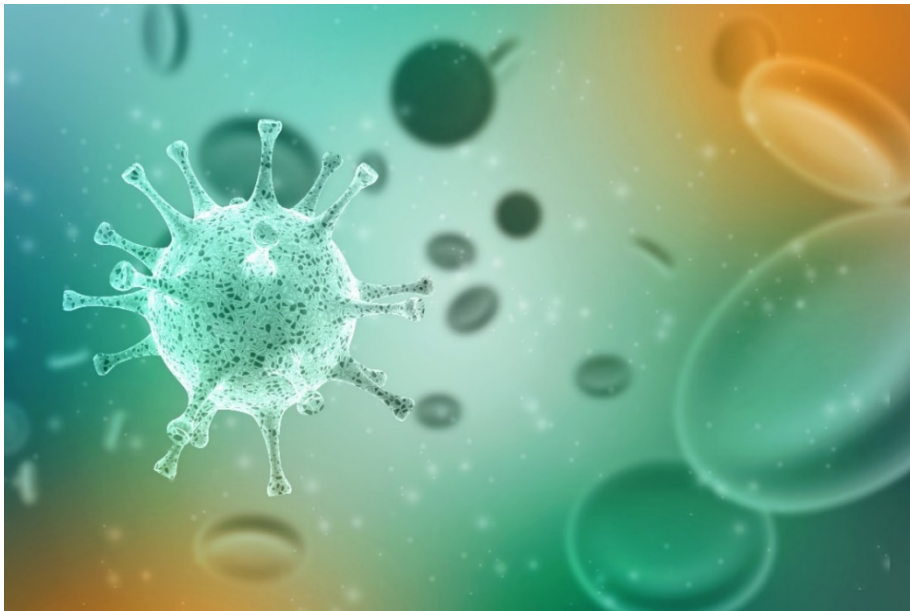
- Also, neurological symptoms, gastrointestinal symptoms, or both – with or without respiratory symptoms, e.g,...
- Brain function – loss of smell, taste, muscle weakness, tingling or numbness, dizziness, confusion, delirium, seizures, stroke
- Gastrointestinal – loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain
- Might start before fever, body ache, and cough

Symptoms begin gradually

- Symptoms may begin gradually
- Many experience only mild symptoms, especially in early stages
- Can worsen rapidly, requiring hospitalization
- Can catch virus from someone who has just a mild cough and does not feel ill



What is the incubation period?



- Incubation period is time between virus exposure and appearance of symptoms
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates it ranges from 2-14 days
- Symptoms usually show up 5 - 6 days after infection

What is the communicable period?

- Time during which an infected person can transmit the virus
- Currently, length of this period is unclear
- Ontario Ministry of Health provides two approaches to clearing infected cases in its COVID-19 Quick Reference Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance (June 25)



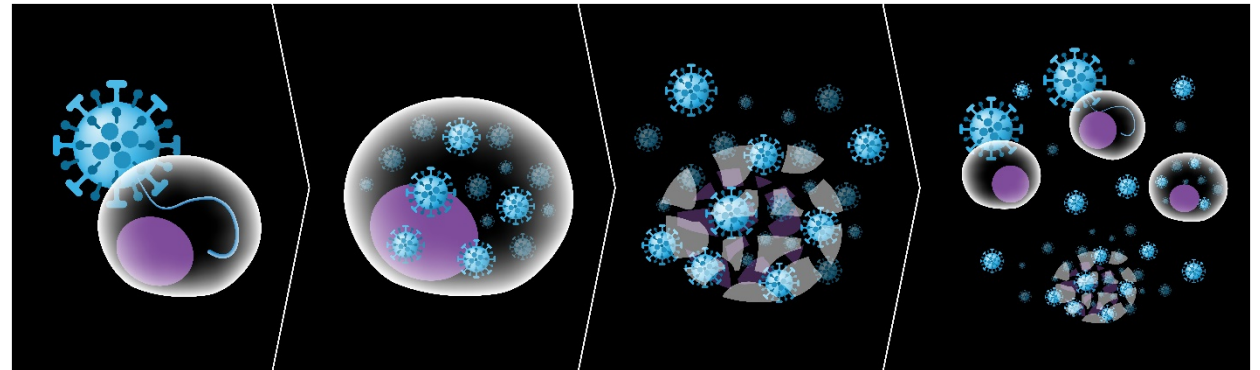
When are people most infectious?

- People have more virus in their bodies around time they develop symptoms
- May be most infectious just **before** they become symptomatic
- In pre-symptomatic phase person feels well, no symptoms, but may be shedding substantial amounts of virus



Virus shedding

- Shedding – when a virus replicates inside the body and is released into the environment, e.g., through coughing
- Shedding of virus is highest in upper respiratory tract (nose and throat) early on



Do people who have the virus always show symptoms?

- Some people have no symptoms when they test positive
- They may be **pre-symptomatic** (they have not yet developed symptoms)
- But some infected people remain **asymptomatic** – the virus is detected but symptoms never develop
- Some studies found substantial number of COVID-19 patients remained asymptomatic to end of their isolation period
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention **estimated 35% of cases are asymptomatic** (end of April)

Can people spread the virus even if they don't have symptoms?

- Yes, but not yet known how often, estimates are mixed ...
- Some studies estimate people without symptoms (pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic) could be **responsible for approximately half the spread**
- Others suggest lower and higher numbers
- Good data showing pre-symptomatic people transmit the virus; less information about asymptomatic people – [Dr. Isaac Bogoch](#), infectious disease specialist, University of Toronto
- Health Canada – infected people may be communicable before showing significant symptoms; most spread is from people with symptoms based on current data

WHO's June 8 press briefing

- June 8, World Health Organization's (WHO's) technical lead on pandemic suggested asymptomatic spread is "very rare"
- Reaction from researchers around the world was swift with many suggesting it created confusion
- Next day, the WHO clarified: actual rates of asymptomatic transmission are not yet known, cited limitations with some studies

Much remains unknown



- Knowledge about asymptomatic transmission evolving – but studying it is challenging...
- People asymptomatic at time of testing may not have been followed to see if they later developed symptoms
- Earlier research may have asked about common symptoms only, missing less common ones

Questions about how asymptomatic people spread COVID-19

- Usually, symptoms help spread the disease
- With the COVID-19 virus, infectious droplets may be expelled through singing, yelling, talking, heavy breathing
- Implications for the workplace



Ministry of Health's Quick Reference Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance (June 25)

- How virus can be diagnosed – for people with and without symptoms
- When to discharge someone with probable or confirmed COVID-19 from isolation
- When cases can be considered resolved



Quick Reference Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance

- Explains conditions for work self-isolation
- Non-symptomatic health care workers awaiting test results continue to work using precautions by facility
- Exceptional circumstances – where clinical care would be severely compromised
 - earlier return to work of COVID-19 positive health care worker can be considered
 - with work self-isolation, recognizing they may still be infectious



Quick Reference Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance (non-health care)

- Also explains when work isolation measures can be considered in **non-health care settings** – depends on symptoms, test results and other factors
- Work self-isolation may not be used for workers with COVID-19 symptoms

Quick Reference Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance (non-health care)

- Work self-isolation – only for non-symptomatic infected workers deemed critical to operations
- Not to replace other accommodations like working from home, if feasible
- Only for use when distancing and source control measures can be maintained
- At the discretion of the local public health unit
- Employer must ensure other workers are not at risk from self-isolating worker

Concerns about work self-isolation

- Concerns among health care professionals, worker advocates, e.g.,...
- Susana Caxaj, nursing professor and a coordinator of the Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group: "Assuming asymptomatic workers would not spread virus is wishful thinking."
- "Farmworkers do hard physical work for long hours. They push their body to the limit. If a person is actually not asymptomatic but pre-symptomatic, we could be putting them at greater risk."



How we can know if this viral hazard is in the workplace?

- Laboratory test
- Assessment centres test – no cost
- Self-assessment tool people can use first
- Tool recommends further steps
- Suggests contacting a health care provider or local public health unit with medical questions



Employer duty if advised a worker tests positive for COVID-19

- If employer is advised a worker tested positive from workplace exposure, or that a WSIB compensation claim was filed, they must notify:
 - The Ministry of Labour in writing, within four days and
 - The joint health and safety committee or health and safety representative and union
- Ministry investigates to determine if employer is in compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act and that appropriate preventative measures have been taken

Three worker rights

- Most workers, including those working with people who are being investigated for COVID-19, have three important rights ...
 - to know about hazards
 - to participate in health and safety matters
 - to refuse unsafe work



Key employer duties

- Ensuring equipment, materials and protective devices are provided and well maintained
- Providing information, instruction and supervision to a worker to protect them
- Appointing competent supervisors
- Taking **every reasonable precaution** to protect workers



What can we do to stay safe in the workplace?



- Uncertainty about transmission – need for prevention
- Precautionary principle: reasonable efforts to reduce risk need not await scientific proof
- Strong COVID-19 plan – assessment, isolation, distance, hygiene, personal protective equipment and cleaning and disinfecting
- Communicate precautions; provide training
- Active joint health and safety committee or health and safety rep, supported by employer

WHSC training

- Now offering virtual classroom training
- Includes the most popular programs, e.g., Certification training for joint health and safety committee members
- New course on COVID-19
- Register for our virtual classroom training on our website or by contacting one of our training services representatives.



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