

Vulnerable populations and COVID-19



While COVID-19 can make anyone sick, some Canadians may be at greater risk of COVID-19 than others due to their occupational, social, economic and other health and life circumstances.

Organizations, staff and volunteers play an important role in helping to prevent these populations from getting or spreading the COVID-19 virus. Start by sharing simple things they can do to help keep themselves and others healthy, guide them to help if they develop any signs and **symptoms** and learn ways help care for sick clients recovering from COVID-19.

Vulnerable populations may include

Individuals who are at **risk of more severe disease or outcomes**, including:

- › older adults (increasing risk with each decade, especially over 60 years)
- › people of any age with chronic medical conditions (e.g., lung disease, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, stroke, or dementia)
- › people of any age who are immunocompromised, including those with an underlying medical condition (e.g., cancer) or taking medications which lower the immune system (e.g., chemotherapy)
- › people living with obesity (BMI of 40 or higher)

Individuals who may be more likely to be exposed to the COVID-19 virus because:

- › Their jobs or occupations require them to be in contact with large numbers of people, which increases their chances of being exposed to someone who has COVID-19
- › They live in group settings where the COVID-19 virus may transmit more easily (e.g., long-term care facilities, correctional facilities, shelters, or group residences)
- › They face barriers that limit their ability to access or implement effective public health measures (e.g., individuals with disabilities who encounter non-accessible information, services and/or facilities)

For example, anyone who has:

- › difficulty reading, speaking, understanding or communicating
- › difficulty accessing medical care or health advice

- › difficulty doing preventive activities, like frequent hand washing and covering coughs and sneezes
- › ongoing specialized medical care or needs specific medical supplies
- › ongoing supervision needs or support for maintaining independence
- › difficulty accessing transportation
- › economic barriers
- › unstable employment or inflexible working conditions
- › social or geographic isolation, like in remote and isolated communities
- › insecure, inadequate, or nonexistent housing conditions

How organizations can support vulnerable populations during COVID-19 outbreaks

Take the time to learn the facts:

- › Know more about COVID-19 by visiting Canada.ca/coronavirus.
- › Keep up-to-date about the current situation in your community.
- › Contact local, provincial, territorial public health officials to get relevant COVID-19 information, resources and guidance.

Take time to get prepared:

- › Review your business continuity plan so you and your staff know what to do.
- › Plan ahead for potential disruptions.
- › Identify and plan how to continue providing the most critical services.
- › Partner with organizations that provide similar services to share resources and strategies.
- › Be prepared to answer questions from staff, volunteers, and clients.
- › Consider stockpiling **general supplies and cleaning and disinfecting supplies**.
- › Prepare for shelters and communal space limitations.



Educate staff about ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- › **Washing hands** often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the washroom and when preparing food
 - use **alcohol-based hand sanitizer** containing at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available
- › Increasing access to hand hygiene and cough etiquette supplies (e.g., alcohol-based hand sanitizer, soap, paper towels, tissues, waste containers).
- › **Cleaning and disinfecting** frequently used spaces, surfaces and objects (kitchens, common areas, dining areas, desks, shared sleeping spaces, doorknobs, and faucets).
- › Maintain **physical distancing**, keeping at least 2 metres from other people.
- › Staying home when sick.
- › Avoiding the use of shared personal items.
- › Sharing information about what to do if staff or a client shows **symptoms** of becoming sick.
- › Sharing steps about **how to care for and isolate people living in a crowded facility** (including the use of separate washrooms, if available).
- › Sharing information about **how to care for people with disabilities**.
 - Sharing information about **providing services for people experiencing homelessness**

Suggestions for supporting vulnerable populations during COVID-19 outbreaks

Provide clear instructions about how to wash hands and cover coughs using:

- › the most commonly used language in the community
- › short messages that explain simple steps they can take
- › large font and graphics
- › accessible instructions (e.g., braille, pictorial)
- › by posting signs in common areas near sinks, entrances, intake areas, restrooms, sleeping areas, recreation areas, waiting rooms

Consider supporting alternatives such as:

- › using volunteer drivers and subsidized taxi fares instead of public transportation
- › putting in place alternative outreach measures or a “buddy” system
- › including policies to allow sick clients to rest in shelters during the day
- › providing access to food, drinks and supplies, as possible
- › reminding clients to fill or refill prescriptions, and necessary medical supplies

Organizations that support: older adults, people of any age with chronic medical conditions, people of any age who are immunocompromised, or people living with obesity are strongly advised to:

- › work with staff to limit their work to a single facility, and limit the locations in the facility in which the employees work.
 - require all staff and visitors to wear a **non-medical mask or face covering** (i.e. made with at least two layers of tightly woven fabric, **constructed** to completely cover the nose and mouth without gaping, and secured to the head by ties or ear loops) to help prevent the spread of potentially infectious respiratory droplets from a person that may not be showing **symptoms** of COVID-19 to other people (and the contamination of surfaces). **Non-medical masks or face coverings provide an extra barrier when physical distancing cannot be ensured.**
- › not allow visits and non-essential on-site services to their facilities, except under compassionate or special circumstances
 - if visitors or service workers are required, screen them for fever, cough or difficulty breathing, and deny entry if symptomatic
- › maintain a high level of vigilance to ensure that staff do not go to work with symptoms
 - do not allow workers to come in to work if they have symptoms
 - screen staff for symptoms before every shift, and
 - send staff home immediately if they develop symptoms during a shift
- › permit entry without screening for emergency first responders in emergency situations
- › discontinue any planned outings for residents – essential medical appointments would ideally be the only exception
- › follow the recommendations for preventing the transmission of infections, including COVID-19, developed by your relevant provincial or territorial health authority

If you suspect a client is sick from COVID-19, please contact your **local public health authority**.

We can all do our part in preventing the spread of COVID-19. For more information, visit

Canada.ca/coronavirus
or contact 1-833-784-4397