

A guide to contact tracing for COVID-19

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Contact tracing is a process conducted by health professionals all around the world. In Queensland, we have specialist teams who spring into action when a situation like the current [COVID-19](#) pandemic occurs. The purpose of contact tracing is to find unidentified cases and stop further spread of disease.

When a person is diagnosed with an infectious disease, contact tracing commences. This has two components: to find out who the infected person has been in contact with while they were infectious, and to identify who the infected person may have caught the disease from. This enables action such as testing and quarantine to limit the spread of disease.

This fact sheet explains how contact tracing happens for COVID-19 and why it's such an important part of keeping the public safe.

How does contact tracing for COVID-19 work?

When a person in Queensland is diagnosed with COVID-19, the public health unit (PHU) in their locality is notified.

The PHU is staffed with public health specialists, whose job is to understand how diseases like COVID-19 spread. These specialists work with the person with COVID-19 to identify people they may have been in contact with while they were infectious. Rapid identification of close contacts is essential for effective contact tracing to control the spread of the virus.

How to notify people at risk?

People with COVID-19 can be infectious for up to 48 hours before they show symptoms. It's important to backtrack to identify all the people they've been in contact with (and to provide their contact details where possible), and the places they have been during this time. The PHU specialists will help them be as clear as possible about where they've been, who they've seen and for how long. If the person identifies that they have been at a workplace, business or venue, these places can be required to provide contact details of people who have worked/attended at the same time as the infected person. These details assist the contact tracers to follow up people who have potentially been in close contact with the infected person. The information is obtained under the *Public Health Act 2005*.

Where possible, the people who are at risk of having been infected will be contacted directly by the PHU and given instructions about what they need to do. If it's not possible to contact people directly, a public health alert with the details of the person's movements is released with a call to be alert for COVID symptoms and to come forward if someone believes they might have come into contact with the infected person. This has been done for cases where people have worked in shopping centres or attended university classes and may have been in close contact with people they don't personally know.

What happens to people identified as being at risk?

Once a person has been identified as having been in close contact with someone infectious with COVID-19, they will be contacted by their local PHU. The PHU might ask them further questions to confirm that the contact occurred and to find out how much contact they had with the infectious person. Based on how much contact they have had and the level of risk of them being infected with COVID-19, the PHU will advise them whether they need to be tested and/or quarantined to avoid passing the infection on to anyone else if they develop the disease.

Why is the public not told all the details about where every confirmed case has been?

There is a number of reasons why it's not a good idea, or even legal, to give the public all the details about the movements of a confirmed case while they might have been infectious. It is generally better if people who may be at risk are directly contacted and their situation is discussed with them in detail.

The risk of catching COVID-19 from another person depends on when, where and how long someone was near the infected person. People are at higher risk of infection if they have had face-to-face contact for 15 minutes cumulative over the course of a week, or shared an enclosed space for more than one or two hours (depending on the setting) with a confirmed case. The risk for people who may have passed a confirmed case on the street or in a shop is extremely low. Based on the extremely low risk in such scenarios and to avoid creating unnecessary anxiety, PHUs usually do not contact anyone who may have only briefly crossed paths with a confirmed case. However, anyone who develops COVID symptoms, no matter how mild, should get tested.

What about the privacy and confidentiality of personal information?

There are privacy laws to limit the kinds of information that can be shared publicly about a person receiving healthcare. These laws protect the privacy of all Queenslanders, and Queensland Health as well as anyone involved in contact tracing abide by them at all times. Personal information collected by Queensland Health as part of contact tracing is stored only in password-protected secure databases.

On rare occasions there may be the need to release limited de-identified information if close contacts are unable to be identified and there is a potential significant health risk to the community. De-identification means removing information that may identify a person, such as the name or address. This is done under provisions in the *Public Health Act 2005*.

Further information

For more information about COVID-19 visit www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/health-alerts/coronavirus-covid-19