

# **Guidance for exemption from quarantine for specific workers who are close contacts**

**COVID-19 Public Health Division**

**Intelligence, Case Contact and Outbreak Management**

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# OVERVIEW

As community transmission of COVID-19 continues throughout Victoria, critical service workers will increasingly become close contacts<sup>1</sup> of confirmed and probable COVID-19 cases. In order to mitigate the risk to public health, close contacts are required to quarantine and undertake testing as mandated by the [Pandemic \(Quarantine, Isolation and Testing\) Order](#) and described in the Department of Health's [COVID-19 Case, Contact and Outbreak Management Policy](#).

Staff absenteeism from increasing numbers of workers who are close contacts, has had a significant impact on the provision of services critical to public health in Victoria. It is anticipated that sustained high rates of community COVID-19 transmission will continue to have similar impacts. Considered and risk-based interventions are needed to preserve workforce capacity and ensure the safe provision of services essential to public health.

Restricting attendance in the workplace for specific essential workers is likely to be disproportionate to the potential transmission risk they pose, when there are appropriate mitigations in place, and when balanced against the public health risks of not ensuring continued operation of essential services.

It is necessary that when providing exemptions for close contacts to attend work, consideration is given to ensuring the health and human rights of individual exempted workers as well as others present in the workplace. This includes taking steps to minimise the likelihood that persons capable of transmitting COVID-19 undertaking COVID-19 test screening prior to attending work and excluding symptomatic close contacts. Similarly, additional steps must be taken to minimise the likelihood that, should an exempted worker become infectious while in the workplace, the likelihood and impact of subsequent transmission is minimised. This is through restricting access to shared break areas, requiring appropriate personal protective equipment, and minimising, where possible, the likelihood of transmission occurring to those at higher risk of developing severe disease.

Specific groups of essential workers who are close contacts have been exempted from the quarantine requirement of the Pandemic (Quarantine, Isolation and Testing) Order only for the purpose of attending work and subject to [conditions](#). The class exemption only applies to close contacts (both those residing with a confirmed or probable case and those residing at a separate premises).

The classes of workers (exempted workers) are:

- directly or indirectly involved in the delivery of healthcare or related services (including ambulance services, pharmacy services, aged care and disability care) OR
- workers where their physical absence from the workplace will have negative impact on people's health and wellbeing (including those delivering custodial care, education, emergency services, gas and electricity services) OR

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<sup>1</sup> A close contact is defined as an individual that resides or stays overnight in the same premises as a confirmed case or probable case or has had a total of four or more hours of contact (cumulative) in a residential setting\* during their infectious period, OR; an individual who has been determined to be a close contact of a diagnosed person by an officer or nominated representative of the department, including in the event of an outbreak, and has been given notice of this.

- workers where their physical absence will restrict and reduce essential food and service supply, (including food industry distribution workers, transport workers, port and freight workers).

Refer to [Exemption of Specific Workers who are Close Contacts in respect of the Pandemic \(Quarantine, Isolation and Testing\) Order](#) for the complete list of exempt workers.

Workers who are close contacts and eligible to return to the workplace should be considered only after all other options have been exhausted, and only if the exempt worker is asymptomatic with a negative COVID test and cannot work from home.

When providing exemptions for close contacts to attend work, maximal consideration is given to ensure the health and human rights of individual exempted workers, as well as others in the workplace.

**The individual rights of workers must be respected, and exempted workers cannot be compelled to attend work.**

This guidance applies to class exemptions of specific workers – individual exemptions provided by the Chief Health Officer or Deputy Chief Health Officers are out of scope for this document and subject to individual consideration and discretion of CHO or DCHO.

## Conditions applicable to the exemption

- Exempt worker must not have any symptoms of COVID-19.
- They must notify each employer that they are a close contact and meet the conditions for exemption. Following this notification, the employer must then determine if the worker's physical attendance is required to prevent significant risk to safe service delivery. Employer must give consideration as to their [work location](#).
- They must travel directly to and from the premises where they are self-quarantining to the workplace, minimising contact with other persons and wearing a mask at all times.
  - When travelling to the workplace, they must not car-pool and where possible avoid public transport.
- They must correctly wear a well fitted face mask (at minimum, a surgical mask) at all times when at the workplace (except if the person is consuming medicine, food or drink or if the mask needs to be removed for safety reasons). Masks should only be removed when workers are alone.
  - Healthcare workers (including ambulance workers, residential aged care facility workers and disability care workers) must wear an N95/P2 mask when at the workplace.
  - N95/P2 mask is strongly recommended where possible for all other exempt workers.
- While in the workplace, they must not enter shared break areas. Employers must ensure that exempted workers can take breaks away from other workers. This could be achieved by staggering breaks, for example.
- They must undertake daily COVID-19 rapid antigen testing and return a negative result prior to commencing work for 5 days after the exempt worker has been identified as a close contact (this requirement is in addition to day 1 and day 6 testing obligations as outlined in the [Testing](#)

Requirements for Contacts and Exposed Persons provided by the Pandemic (QIT) Order).

- Workers should not take multiple tests on a particular day to satisfy both requirements. One test per day is sufficient, unless new symptoms develop.
- If an exempted worker returns a positive rapid antigen test OR develops symptoms of COVID-19, the exemption no longer applies and they must notify their employer, isolate and follow obligations outlined in the Department of Health's [COVID-19 Case, Contact and Outbreak Management Policy](#).
- They must comply with any applicable employer policy, procedures, directions and orders that may apply in respect of their attendance at the workplace.
- They must comply with all other applicable requirements under the [Pandemic Order](#).

### **Preferred work locations**

If an exempted healthcare worker returns to work, all reasonable steps should be taken to ensure they are deployed in areas where the risk of transmission is likely to have the lowest impact.

In order of preference, exempted healthcare workers should:

- Work from home if possible (e.g. telehealth) or in a setting where there is no physical interaction with others.
- If the above is not possible, work with confirmed COVID-19 cases.
- If the above is not possible, work in other clinical areas and, where operationally possible, not in high-risk areas with people (including patients, clients and co-workers) who are immune-suppressed or have significant co-morbidities.

In order of preference, the exempted worker, for all other settings, ideally:

- Works from home or in a setting where there is no physical interaction with others;
- If the above is not possible, limit face-to-face contact with others;
- If above not possible, and where operationally possible, does not work in areas with people (including customers, clients and co-workers) who are immunosuppressed or have significant co-morbidities.

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