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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As community transmission of COVID-19 continues to rise throughout Victoria, critical service workers will increasingly become close contacts\(^1\) of confirmed and probable COVID-19 cases. In order to mitigate the risk to public health, close contacts are required to isolate, 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. This is having a significant impact on the ability of essential services to function. Considered and urgent measures are needed to preserve the capacity of essential workforces.

With high levels of COVID-19 community transmission, restricting attendance in the workplace for specific essential workers is considered disproportionate to the potential transmission risk they pose, when there are appropriate mitigations in place and when balanced against the risks of not ensuring continued operation of critical services.

Specific 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 the conditions. The exemption 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:

- healthcare workers
- residential aged care facility workers
- disability care workers
- critical food industry distribution workers
- emergency service workers
- custodial workers
- utility and urban workers
- port or freight workers
- transport workers
- education workers
- care workers

\(^1\) 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.
- pharmacy workers
- funeral 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.

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

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

**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 to 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.
- They must correctly wear a well fitted face mask (at minimum, a surgical mask) at all times when in the contact of others 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.

- When travelling to the workplace, they must not car-pool and where possible avoid public transport.

- 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 immediately advise each employer that the exemption no longer applies, if they no longer meet any of these conditions.

- 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 immunosuppressed 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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