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GTA

How do I stay safe as Ontario reopens? A germ expert's guide to bars, pools, haircuts and beaches

By **Laura Armstrong** Staff Reporter

Fri., June 12, 2020 | ⌚ 5 min. read

Much of Ontario took another step forward in terms of [reopening Friday](#) when most regions outside the GTA entered stage two of the government's plan to bounce back from a province-wide [COVID-19](#) shutdown.

The likelihood of encountering someone who is infected is low in the areas allowed to open, said microbiologist Dr. Dasantila Golemi-Kotra, an associate professor of biology at York University.

Still, the risk of being exposed to the virus remains and could grow as people go out more often and in larger numbers, in part because asymptomatic people can silently spread the virus.

In short, the world Ontarians are stepping into is not the one they left three months ago. That will still be true when the rest of the province, including Toronto, joins stage two — something that's expected to happen in a matter of weeks.

The main tenets of fighting COVID-19 remain, Golemi-Kotra said.

- Wash your hands as often as possible and use hand sanitizer when handwashing is not possible.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Maintain a physical distance of two metres when outside the home, especially in confined areas. Avoid crowds.
- Wear a face mask when you can't maintain safe physical distance at all times, like while shopping or taking public transportation.
- Wear a face shield and a face mask when safe physical distance is not possible and you are in frequent contact with people, such as if you are working as a store clerk.
- Wear gloves if you are in frequent contact with highly touched surfaces and frequent handwashing is not practical, such as in bathrooms and shopping areas.
- Don't leave the house if you are having symptoms or not feeling well.

There are extra things she advises depending on where you plan to go. Being prepared is key and packing the right things along for any trip is important, she said.

Golemi-Kotra suggests doing different activities on different days, and keeping them short to limit the amount of items you need to bring along for safety reasons.

Make sure restaurants are screening patrons, employees are wearing masks and tables are being disinfected between use.

Ensure salons are maintaining good hygiene by having employees wash hands between patrons and disinfecting equipment, like immersing combs in disinfecting solution and cleaning scissors between cuts.

Check your cellphone and use the bathroom before you leave the house; you don't want to use either while out. Golemi-Kotra also suggests designating clothes for house-only use, to avoid possible household contamination, especially when going to high-traffic places where you sit for extended periods of time.

Wondering what should be in your bag in stage two? Golemi-Kotra suggests a face mask, to be wrapped in a paper towel and stored in a Ziploc bag when not in use; Lysol wipes or hand sanitizer, to be used if you're touching high-traffic surfaces; gloves if you are in frequent contact with highly touched surfaces and frequent handwashing is not practical; and a credit card, kept in a handy spot so you don't have to search through your purse or wallet when making a purchase.

Physical distancing will not be possible at salons because of the close interactions between patrons and the person providing the service, so Golemi-Kotra suggests avoiding coupling services, like a haircut and hair colour, on the same day.

Washing your hair yourself before you go to the salon also cuts down on time, close contact and aerosols, which are submicron respiratory droplets that can linger in the air for a longer time, somewhere from eight minutes to 15 minutes or more, and can transmit the virus. Hair-drying could move respiratory droplets toward you, the hairdresser or anyone else nearby — avoid it if you can.

One way to mitigate the number of droplets in the air is by avoiding conversation where possible.

"Studies actually have shown ... when we normally breathe, these respiratory droplets are in smaller numbers but also relatively small in size," said Golemi-Kotra. "When we talk loud or passionately, the number of these respiratory droplets goes up by 1,000 more or so. Not only do they go out in larger numbers, they go out with a bigger force. You're getting more droplets out there and they can travel a bit further."

Keeping conversations low or to a minimum is also recommended in restaurants, said Golemi-Kotra. She suggests frequenting places that you know and trust to be clean with trained staff who handle food safely, though there is a low risk of transmitting the virus through contaminated food.

Patios are open for a reason, so stay on them rather than venturing into the restaurant. Don't share utensils or glasses, but there is no need to go so far as to bring your own; cutlery is washed at high enough temperatures to disinfect between uses.

Public swimming pool water, or any public recreational water parks, should destroy the COVID-19 virus because of chemical treatments like chlorine or bromine, said Golemi-Kotra. Beaches should also be easier to navigate than other spaces because they're outdoors.

Physical distancing still needs to be observed, both in and out of the water. Areas around the beach or pool, like public change rooms, showers, food trucks or stores, can increase risk because of proximity to others and should be avoided.

If you have to use a public washroom — which often lack a good ventilation system, meaning aerosols can linger for longer periods of time — keep it short, and wash your hands or use hand sanitizer afterwards.

Golemi-Kotra was pleased to see the Ontario government release strict health and safety guidelines for reopening daycares, which she encourages parents to read. Children represent a very low risk group in terms of getting seriously sick with COVID-19, but care providers and the children's family members may belong to a high-risk group.

Challenges at daycare centres include: maintaining physical distance between children, and between the staff and the children; ensuring that young children don't share toys or put them in the mouth; and maintaining a constantly clean environment while the children are there.

Protecting children's safety starts at home, where parents should talk about the new daycare normal where possible, emphasizing to the child the importance of physical distancing, handwashing, not touching their faces and not putting things in their mouths. Golemi-Kotra encourages parents to wait until they get home from daycare to hug and kiss their child, and to monitor the child closely for symptoms, including Kawasaki syndrome.

As for masks, Golemi-Kotra "highly suggests" not making children wear them.

"It just doesn't work," she said. "It may actually be more harmful, especially if the mask ends up on the floor then (the child) has to put it back. They may get other infections."

Protecting your household from contamination begins the minute you leave another location, like a salon or daycare, with the use of hand sanitizer.

At home, Golemi-Kotra suggests both adults and children take a shower and change into designated indoor clothes. Outdoor clothes and face masks should be put in the laundry, ideally in a bin with a lid, though they do not have to be washed immediately. The virus will likely die on the clothes within three to four days, but they should still be washed, just in case.



Laura Armstrong is a Star reporter based in Toronto. Follow her on Twitter: [@lauraarmy](https://twitter.com/lauraarmy)

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