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EXPLAINER

How often should I get tested for COVID-19? An epidemiologist explains

By **Laura Armstrong** Staff Reporter

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Editor's note: The Star is taking a broad look at what entering the second phase of reopening after COVID-19 lockdowns will mean for Ontario. Every day, we'll try and answer a different question about post-lockdown life. You can read a recap of all of the questions we've answered [here](#).

Anyone in Ontario can get tested for COVID-19, after Premier Doug Ford opened up testing across the province late last month.

But what does that mean for the average Ontarian? Who, when and how often should you get tested?

Testing is appropriate for anyone who thinks they have a symptom or is concerned about exposure, according to Hayley Chazan, a spokesperson for health minister Christine Elliott.

A Ministry of Long-Term Care memo sent to long-term care homes licensees at the end of May said the province required continued surveillance testing of LTC home staff and “intended” for all long-term care home staff to be tested “at reasonable intervals, a minimum twice in the month of June,” though care homes could test their staff more frequently. Another memo, from the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, sent out June 9 to retirement home licensees, asked all retirement homes to ensure testing was done every two weeks on any individual working in the home.

There are no recommended testing intervals for the public, according to Chazan.

Timothy Sly, an epidemiologist and professor at the School of Occupational and Public Health at Ryerson University and who was involved in the management of SARS in Toronto in 2003, said testing should work on a hierarchy system, with everybody in the hospital system and long-term care homes tested once a week. There should be a hierarchy within those institutions, too, with people like respiratory therapists and triage nurses at the top.

Anyone who is dealing with the public on a regular basis, and there are more people who fit this bill in stage two, should also be getting tested regularly — if tests are available — like hairdressers, wait staff, airline attendants, and taxi and limousine drivers.

“If you look back ... where’s been the real spreading events? They’ve all been institutions in one way or another, whether they’re meat-packing plants or jails and prisons, or cruise ships or (long-term care) homes,” Sly said. “They’ve been that kind of organized thing where factory workers are side by side for an eight-hour shift, breathing air 18 inches from somebody else. From a larger, community point of view, we really should be looking at strategic testing, taking advantage of the tests available to start looking for all the places that the virus might be and we don’t know where it is.”

As for the ordinary person who has been staying home for the past few months without really going anywhere? There is not much point in that person getting tested, Sly said.

Testing is one point in time; a negative test does not necessarily mean a person is free of COVID-19. That's why Sly suggests someone who believes they know the point of infection should wait a couple of days — while isolated — before going for a test.

"If you think you've just run into a situation ... and you think you were exposed this afternoon, don't go and get tested now," Sly said. "They won't find anything. It's going to take two or three days to find anything in your throat, so that would be a waste for a test."



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

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