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March 8, 2022

## Updates to LTC Vaccination, Testing Requirements and Cohorting and Ministry Webinar for Residents (March 15)

Dear Residents, Team Members and Supportive Partners,

Earlier this morning, our partners at the Ministry of Long-Term Care (MLTC), in consultation with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, circulated an announcement containing significant changes to the LTC vaccination and testing requirements, as well as updates to current guidance on resident cohorting and social engagement activities. An overview of these changes, which come into effect on March 14, was communicated by Erin Hannah, Associate Deputy Minister LTC Pandemic Response, in the form of a sector [Memo](#).

Additional resources have been created and updated by our Ministry partners to promote a more fulsome understanding of the anticipated changes:

- [COVID-19 Guidance Document for Long-Term Care Homes in Ontario](#)
- [Minister's Directive: COVID-19: Long Term Care Home Surveillance Testing and Access to Homes](#)
- [Key Messages to Support Residents and Families \(EN\)](#)
- [Key Messages to Support Residents and Families \(FR\)](#)
- [Visitor Absences and Social Gatherings Snapshot \(EN\)](#)
- [Visitor Absences and Social Gatherings Snapshot \(FR\)](#)
- [COVID-19 Policies: What Residents Can Expect in Long-Term Care Homes \(EN\)](#)
- [COVID-19 Policies: What Residents Can Expect in Long-Term Care Homes \(FR\)](#)
- [Pandemic Response Frequently Asked Questions](#)

This OARC bulletin will help to highlight for residents (as well as their families/friends and teams) what changes they can expect to see beginning next week.

Building upon this communication, OARC is excited to share that the MLTC has also committed to joining us on our Zoom platform for another **dedicated [webinar](#) for residents** on Tuesday, March 15<sup>th</sup> at 2:30pm (details shared later in this bulletin) so that residents have an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the rationale and impact of these changes.

## **Effective March 14th: Changes in Provincially-Mandated Vaccination Requirements**

- The provincial directive requiring homes to have a consistent vaccination policy will be revoked. Each LTC home will be responsible for its own vaccination policy.
  - Vaccination remains a key defense against COVID-19 and all Ontarians who are eligible are encouraged to get vaccinated, including receiving a booster dose.
  - Everyone is reminded of the importance of remaining vigilant with public health measures, such as screening and testing, masking and using appropriate personal protective equipment.
  - The Ministry continues to work with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health to monitor trends and will respond as needed if for example, a new variant emerges.

## **Effective Monday, March 14<sup>th</sup>: Changes to Visitation, Leaves of Absence, Social Engagement Opportunities and Cohorting**

- All general visitors, including children under the age of 5, can visit homes. Visitors (including caregivers), with the exception of children under the age of 5, need to follow the vaccination policy of the individual long-term care home.
- Outdoor visits can be any size, space permitting.
- There can be up to 4 general visitors and/or caregivers visiting a resident at one time.
- All residents can go on social overnight absences.
  - Testing of residents returning from day or overnight absences at established intervals will continue until further notice, to identify as early as possible any individual who may become infected with COVID-19 in order to reduce transmission in the home.
- Residents from different areas/parts of the LTC home can now come together for social activities. Cohorting is required for dining only.
- Social group activities can be larger in size while crowding should be avoided and masking continued, including for residents where tolerated.

## **Questions and Answers**

The following list of common questions and their responses has been compiled by the Ministry and captured in both the [Key Messages to Support Residents and Families](#) and appear in a more expanded format in the [Pandemic Response FAQ](#) document:

**Q: Why is the Ministry moving away from mandatory vaccination for all long-term care homes and allowing homes to implement their own/different vaccination policies?**

**A:** The provincial directive was needed earlier in the pandemic to consistently support all homes to put a vaccination policy in place. The provincial directive specified the elements that must be in each policy at a minimum and those specifics changed over time. Most recently the provincial directive was updated to include a third dose requirement for staff, students, volunteers, support workers and caregivers. All homes now have a vaccination policy in place, and at this point in the pandemic we are able to shift from a provincial directive that requires homes to have a mandatory vaccination policy to a guidance-based approach that continues to support homes with their employer-led policies and best practices. While the provincial directive is revoked effective March 14, 2022, long-term care homes can keep their vaccination policies in place, with any changes they have determined to be appropriate. For example, homes may not retain a third dose requirement if, for example, they are concerned about staffing. Home policies can continue to have requirements for staff, volunteers, support workers, student placements, caregivers, general visitors, or other people entering a long-term care home. These requirements must be consistent with the Long-Term Care Homes Act, 2007, including the Residents' Bill of Rights, and comply with all applicable laws, such as the Human Rights Code.

**Q: Could staff that were previously put on leave or terminated due to not getting vaccinated return to work?**

**A:** Long-term care homes, as employers, can keep their vaccination policies in place. They retain their ability to mandate vaccination requirements. Home policies can continue to have requirements for staff, volunteers, support workers, student placements, caregivers, general visitors, or other people entering a long-term care home. These requirements must be consistent with the Long-Term Care Homes Act, 2007, including the Residents' Bill of Rights, and comply with all applicable laws, such as the Human Rights Code. Homes need to communicate how their vaccination policy is continuing beyond the life of the provincial directive.

**Q: What if I am not comfortable with an unvaccinated staff member providing me care?**

**A:** Regardless of vaccination status, all staff are actively screened when they enter a long-term care home and must be tested regularly for COVID-19. Staff must also wear appropriate personal protective equipment when providing care to residents. We encourage you to speak to your home if you have concerns about the care you are receiving.

**Q: Are masks still required?**

**A:** All staff and visitors must wear a medical mask for the entire duration of their shift or visit (including in the residents' room). Additionally, a medical or non-medical mask is required for the entire duration of an outdoor visit for general visitors. Removal of masks for the purposes of eating should be restricted to only areas designated by the home. Residents are encouraged by their home to wear, or be assisted to wear, a medical mask or non-medical mask when receiving direct care from staff, when in common areas with other residents (with the exception of meal times), and when receiving a visitor, as tolerated.

**Q: Who can visit a resident in a long-term care home?**

**A:** As of March 14, 2022, all persons can visit a long-term care home as long as they follow the home's vaccination policy. Children under the age of 5 can also visit homes although they are not eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

**Q: Can general visitors and essential caregivers join residents for a meal and for social gatherings (both for communal dining or in the resident's room)?**

**A:** Caregivers and general visitors may accompany a resident for meals to assist a resident with eating, however, they need to always keep their mask on and are not able to eat with the resident. Caregivers and general visitors do not need to physically distance themselves from residents they are visiting and may join group activities with residents as space permits.

**Q: Will any vaccination requirements remain in place for residents who go on social absences?**

**A:** As of March 14, 2022, all residents, regardless of their vaccination status, can enjoy social absences of any duration, including overnight absences.

**Q: Can residents from different units/floors socialize with each other?**

**A:** Yes, residents can socialize within and across units, when indoors and outdoors. Residents should still follow public health measures, especially when indoors, which includes masking (as tolerated) and maintaining physical distancing between groups. There are no requirements for residents to remain in a cohort except for during dining unless during an outbreak.

Each home should determine the size of social gatherings among residents that best reflect the realities of the home from a staffing and space perspective in order to ensure these social opportunities are as safe as possible. Large social group activities where potential crowding can occur should continue to be avoided, and IPAC measures should continue to be followed by staff, residents and visitors.

## **Q: Who can I contact if I have any issues or questions?**

**A:** If you have questions about the Ministry's direction or requirements, please contact [MLTCpandemicresponse@ontario.ca](mailto:MLTCpandemicresponse@ontario.ca). If you have questions about a specific home's vaccination policy, please contact the individual home.

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## **Webinar for LTC Residents and Residents' Council Leaders: March 15 at 2:30pm Pandemic Update: Vaccination, Testing Requirements and Social Engagement Opportunities**

The OARC team is excited to host our Ministry partners once again for a special webinar offering tailored for our resident audience. This session is intended to help support a full and consistent understanding of the changes to the LTC vaccination and testing requirements as well as cohorting and social engagement opportunities. This is a special opportunity for residents to hear first-hand from the representatives from the Ministry's Pandemic Response team and have your questions addressed.

This session is open to **all residents** and their supportive partners. Residents' Council leaders from throughout your LTC homes are strongly encouraged to attend the live session or tune into the recording that will be circulated following the session. To support your understanding of the changes and in preparation for the webinar, you may consider looking at the following reference documents designed for residents: [What Residents Can Expect in a LTC Home](#) (as of March 14, 2022) [Key Messages to Support Residents and Families in LTC Homes](#) (March 9, 2022)

### **Join the Zoom Webinar directly on Tuesday, March 15 at 2:30pm**

From your computer <https://zoom.us/j/94286273168>

Or toll-free by telephone: 877-853-5257 - Meeting ID: 942 8627 3168

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## **OARC Reflections**

On behalf of the OARC team, we wanted to acknowledge that many of the announcements and anticipated changes contained in this bulletin will likely be met with some very mixed feelings.

As Erin Hannah's [Memo](#) states, "The vaccination program in long-term care homes has been a tremendous success, supported by the dedication of you and your leadership teams. The staff, residents, and family members who have stepped up to get vaccinated to protect themselves, their colleagues, and the residents they support each day helped to mitigate the severity of outbreaks and get us to the downside of the Omicron wave."

Over the last 2 years, residents have also made significant sacrifices in following the infection control guidance in their homes - remaining cohorted from their peers and unable to receive general visitors for an extended period. Experiences of loss, loneliness, and frustration have only been intensified by the riding the wave of changes in guidance as we continued to learn more about COVID-19 and how to safely navigate through this period of uncertainty.

We recognize the tremendous impact this has had on everyone and we are here to listen and support you as we move forward in this next phase of change. We are encouraged by the news that cohorting is a restriction of the past, thereby providing opportunities to resume larger, congregate style Residents' Council meetings, and social gatherings amongst residents, some of whom haven't seen one another for a very long time!

We look forward to hosting our Ministry guests next week for the resident [webinar](#). Together, we remain committed to keeping residents informed and engaged every step of the way.

Yours sincerely,



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Executive Director, OARC



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Director of Education and Communications

*The French version of the Bulletin will be posted on the OARC website soon after distribution (<https://www.ontarc.com/communications/bulletins.html>).*