



Frequently asked questions

Return to work: updated guidance for healthcare workers

OFFICIAL

Healthcare workers are now able to return to work when they are 'close contacts' provided they are well, symptom-free and return a negative rapid antigen test prior to their shift/return to the workplace.

Frequently asked questions

These frequently asked questions relate to [Healthcare service contact assessment and management guidance: Health services \(hospitals\)](#) and the exemptions from quarantine available for healthcare workers in hospitals, to support their fellow workers and to enable the safe delivery of care for patients during the peak period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The exemptions can be applied to hospital and ambulance workers who are close contacts of confirmed and probable COVID-19 cases.

This guidance aims to balance the low risk to the community from healthcare workers who are close contacts but are **well, symptom-free and have returned negative rapid antigen tests (RATs)**, with the high risk of people being otherwise unable to access urgent and necessary healthcare given the increasing pressure on the hospital system.

What has changed?

Healthcare workers are now able to return to work when they are 'close contacts' of a confirmed (positive PCR result) or probable (positive RAT) COVID-19 case provided they feel well, are symptom-free, and return negative RATs prior to their shift/return to the workplace.

A new exemption to the Public Health Order is in place providing an exemption from 7-day quarantine for healthcare workers employed in hospitals provided that certain safeguards are in place.

This exemption only applies to attending the workplace, and healthcare workers must otherwise continue to quarantine while not working.

Who does this guidance apply to?

This information outlined in this document **only applies** to healthcare workers in hospitals, including workers engaged to provide ambulance, paramedic and medical retrieval services who are working in connection with a hospital. This includes both clinical and non-clinical workers in hospital and ambulance settings, including healthcare students.

However, specific leave entitlements described in this guidance will only be relevant to employees of Victorian public health services, including Ambulance Victoria.

Similar exemptions are being introduced for other essential workers, including aged care and disability workers, with separate guidance documents prepared to support these workforces.

Why have exemptions from quarantine for healthcare workers been introduced?

High community transmission across Victoria is resulting in significant staff shortages due to quarantine requirements, including in healthcare and particularly emergency, maternity and acute care.

Like all members of the Victorian community, healthcare workers will potentially be exposed to COVID-19, become contacts of positive and probable cases, and therefore have quarantine obligations. Rates of unavailable staff across the Victorian health system have significantly increased, creating further pressure on remaining staff and posing risks to patient care.

Approximately half of all unavailable staff are close contacts and are well, symptom-free and have returned negative RATs, and have the potential to safely return to work with appropriate safeguards in place.

High levels of unavailable staff impact the ability for health services to provide the staffing levels required to deliver safe patient care. It also places greater pressure on the remaining healthcare workforce during this peak period.

At a national level, similar exemptions have been introduced for a range of other essential workforces that have been significantly affected by staff unavailability.

The exemption is to be used where a worker's attendance at work is necessary to prevent significant risks to safe service delivery. Employers must respect the individual rights of workers and are not able to direct their workers to attend work.

How long will this exemption apply for?

The exemption is effective from 11:59pm on 12 January 2022 and ends at 11:59pm on 23 February 2022. It will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure it remains a proportionate response to the current public health situation.

Are other types of workers covered by an exemption?

Yes - a range of essential workers may be eligible to attend work under the exemption, such as food production and distributions workers, freight, warehousing and storage workers.

This guidance document **only applies** to healthcare workers in hospitals, as well as workers engaged to provide ambulance, paramedic and medical retrieval services who are working in connection with a hospital.

Does the Local Public Health Unit Director have to approve an exemption?

No - the new exemption is a class exemption which is available for all healthcare workers in hospitals, as well as workers engaged to provide ambulance, paramedic and medical retrieval services who are working in connection with a hospital.

There is no need for a Local Public Health Unit Director to review and approve individual healthcare worker exemptions under these new settings.

Didn't changes to quarantine requirements just happen for everyone else? How are these different?

Yes - recently there have been a range of changes to contact and isolation requirements for all Victorians, including healthcare workers.

Recent changes to close contact requirements have included:

- the reduction for quarantine when diagnosed with COVID-19 (a case) to 7 days (regardless of vaccination status); rather than the previous 10 or 14 days;
- reduction in the types of situations that require quarantine and testing; and
- increased use of RATs as a suitable alternative to PCR testing, including for diagnosis (a probable case) and access to care.

These further changes applicable to healthcare workers mean that healthcare workers who are close contacts have an exemption from quarantine requirements to attend work, if **they are well, symptom-free and have a negative RAT**.

Won't I be a risk to my other staff and patients under these changes?

Anyone returning to work as a close contact should **only** do so where they are well, symptom-free and have returned a negative RAT prior to their first shift/return to the workplace, and prior to each subsequent shift for five days.

Linking to overarching public health objectives, restricting workplace attendance for symptom-free staff who are close contacts can be considered an acceptable risk to the potential transmission risk posed when there are appropriate safeguards in place.

To further reduce the risks to other staff and patients, the following safeguards will be in place:

- Healthcare workers must have daily RATs and return a negative result on each day prior to attending work during their quarantine period. The RAT must be performed prior to attending the workplace. RATs will be supplied by health services.
- Healthcare workers must wear an N95/P2 respirator at all times when required to wear a mask.
- Healthcare workers must not use shared break or change rooms (and other areas where masks are not worn, such as when eating or drinking). Alternate arrangements will be put in place for staff impacted by these safeguards and these should be discussed with your employer before you return to work.

Further and specific details are outlined in [Healthcare service contact assessment and management guidance: Health services \(hospitals\)](#). If you have concerns about attending work, you should discuss these directly with your employer.

When do I need to isolate?

Healthcare workers must immediately notify their employer, isolate and seek a COVID-19 test if they experience symptoms that could indicate COVID-19 infection, and remain in isolation until they receive a negative result.

Healthcare workers who return a positive test **must self-isolate for a minimum of 7 days** and continue to isolate if their symptoms have not yet resolved at the end of their quarantine period.

Further obligations, including notifying the workplace, contacts and self-reporting result (if using a RAT) can be found via the [Checklist for COVID-19 Cases](#).

What if I am a close contact or exposed to COVID-19 within my household?

All close contacts are required to get tested immediately. A close contact without COVID-19 symptoms must undertake a RAT (or a PCR test if a RAT is not available) on Day 1 and Day 6 from when they are required to self-quarantine.

A close contact is defined as a person who has had:

- at least 4 or more cumulative hours of face-to-face contact in a home or home-like environment with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19, or
- lives in the same household with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 during their infectious period.

Healthcare workers who are close contacts and experiencing symptoms cannot return to work. They must isolate and get tested immediately.

Healthcare workers who are close contacts, and who are well, symptom free and return a negative RAT or PCR, may return to work under the exemption if they:

- notify each employer that they are a close contact, self-quarantining and intend to work under this exemption,
- have daily RATs and return a negative result prior to attending work on each day of their quarantine period,
- wear an N95/P2 respirator at all times when required to wear a mask (except while on breaks in an isolated space),
- do not enter shared break areas or change rooms (where masks are removed),
- travel directly to and from the workplace premises, minimising contact with other persons, and
- when travelling to the workplace do not use car-pooling, and where possible avoid public transport.

Outside of work, healthcare workers are required to stay home consistent with quarantine advice to the general community for close contacts.

More details are available in [Healthcare service contact assessment and management guidance: Health services \(hospitals\)](#).

What if I need to provide care to someone in my household who is a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case?

If you need to provide care to someone in your household who is a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case (for example, a child) and you are a close contact, you will continue to have access to special leave for the required 7 day quarantine period.

Following the 7 day quarantine period, you can use your available personal/carer's leave in line with the leave arrangements that are available from your employer.

The health and wellbeing of household members is a priority, so close contact healthcare workers should feel supported in focus on care requirements in these situations.

Further details can be found in the [Checklist for Household and Household-like Contacts](#).

I am eligible to work under the exemption. Do I have to go to work?

No - the exemption is voluntary.

Healthcare workers who are close contacts and are eligible to work under the exemption cannot be forced to work.

Healthcare workers who are close contacts, are well, symptom-free and return a negative RAT or PCR, may return to work under the exemption but are not required to do so.

Outside of the workplace, all healthcare workers who are close contacts remain subject to a 7 day quarantine period.

I am eligible to work under the exemption. If I choose not to work, can I still access special leave?

Employees who are close contacts, and are well, symptom-free and return a negative RAT or PCR, are eligible to work under the exemption.

Staff who do not wish to attend work under the exemption, and where it is agreed that working from home is not reasonable, practical or appropriate, will continue to have access to special leave for the 7 day quarantine period.

What if I am a social contact?

Workplace, education or social contacts are **not required** to quarantine if they are symptom-free.

A workplace, education or social contact has had:

- at least 15 minutes face to face contact, or
- greater than 2 hours within the same room (less than 100m²) with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 during their infectious period.

There are no quarantine requirements for healthcare workers who are workplace, education or social contacts.

However, these workers must follow additional safety precautions when at work including:

- wear an N95/P2 respirator when required to wear a mask (except while on breaks in an isolated space),
- while in the workplace, do not enter shared break areas (where masks are removed),
- return a negative RAT on Day 1 (after being notified they are a workplace, education or social contact), and
- conduct daily RAT and return a negative result on each day prior to work for 5 days after being notified that they are a contact.

If a healthcare worker experiences any symptoms, they must immediately isolate and seek testing before returning to work.

More details are available in [Healthcare service contact assessment and management guidance: Health services \(hospitals\)](#).

If I am only working one shift, do I still need to do a daily rapid antigen test?

Yes, as well as the day 1 and day 6 RAT or PCR, you are still required to undertake 5 daily RAT and return a negative result each day.

What should I do if I develop symptoms during my shift?

Notify your employer immediately and cease your shift.

You should immediately isolate, and seek testing via a RAT or PCR test. Do not return to in-person to work until you have a negative test result, feel well and are symptom-free.

You will need to continue to conduct daily RAT and return a negative result on each day prior to work for 5 days after being notified that you are a contact.

I have symptoms of COVID-19 – should I attend work in person?

No - you should not attend in-person work at a healthcare facility.

You should immediately isolate and seek testing via a RAT or PCR test. Do not return to in-person work until you have a negative result, feel well and are symptom-free.

You will need to continue to conduct daily RAT and return a negative result on each day prior to work for 5 days after being notified that you are a contact

Further obligations, including notifying the workplace, contacts and self-reporting result (if using a RAT) can be found via the [Checklist for COVID-19 Cases](#).

Who will provide Rapid Antigen Tests (RAT)?

Health services will provide access to a RAT with availability projected to improve across coming weeks. Please discuss access to a RAT directly with your employer.

If you are unable to access a RAT prior to each shift during the 7 day quarantine period, you will be unable to attend work on that day.

I tested positive to COVID-19. Once my 7-day quarantine has been completed, do I need to test negative before returning to work?

No - you do not need to test negative once your 7 day isolation is concluded to return to work if you were a positive case.

You are not expected to return to work in person until you are well and symptom-free. If you are continuing to experience symptoms post the 7 day isolation period, you will be able to use your personal/sick leave and any other leave entitlements that may be appropriate.

Can a healthcare worker return to work if they are feeling unwell?

No - if you are unwell, you should take available personal leave, rest and recover.

If you are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, seek testing via a RAT or PCR test and isolate until you receive a negative result.

Can I still access leave if I become COVID-19 positive?

If you become COVID-19 positive, you are required to isolate for 7 days. Special leave is available for the 7 day isolation period. If you are still symptomatic following the 7 day isolation period, it is expected that you will then use your available personal leave.

Where the employee has exhausted their personal leave and other leave entitlements, access to paid Special Leave may be considered on a case-by-case basis.

An employee who contracts COVID-19 through their work can exercise their rights to make a WorkCover claim.

Depending on your work role and skills, and only if you are experiencing no or minimal symptoms, you may be able to continue to work from home/remotely doing other tasks during your isolation period.

Do I need a medical certificate to prove I am COVID-19 positive?

No - you should provide proof of your positive test result (either RAT or PCR) to your employer.

There is no need to obtain a medical certificate for a COVID-19 diagnosis for the 7 day self-isolation period.

Can I work from home if I am COVID-19 positive?

Yes - if you are experiencing no or minimal symptoms, and are feeling well, you may be able to undertake some tasks from home by working remotely, including providing virtual care.

This is dependent on your specific work role and skills. Please discuss working from home options directly with your employer.

You are not expected to work if you are unwell.

Why must I remain in quarantine outside of work?

In the healthcare setting there are a range of additional safety precautions and protocols for people who are close contacts that do not apply within the general community.

This includes always wearing appropriate PPE with a fitted N95/P2 respirator when required to wear a face mask, a requirement for you to take any breaks separately from others, and careful adherence to hygiene measures. These steps significantly reduce the risks of COVID-19 transmission.

This exemption is available to enable continued delivery of healthcare services, balancing public health risks in supporting other healthcare workers and patients during the peak pandemic period.

Can I access accommodation to quarantine?

Yes - accommodation is available for eligible frontline workers who need support to quarantine or isolate safely under the Frontline Workers (FLW) Accommodation Program.

The FLW Accommodation Program provides temporary quarantine or isolation accommodation for eligible frontline workers who are:

- confirmed by the Department of Health to have COVID-19 or be identified as a close contact of someone confirmed to have COVID-19, and
- a person who cannot safely self-isolate or quarantine in their home.

Circumstances where it may not be appropriate to self-quarantine or isolate at home include:

- living with a vulnerable or at-risk person (e.g. unvaccinated, immunocompromised) - for more information see the Department of Health's advice on [who is most at risk of becoming very sick from COVID-19](#)
- living with another frontline worker, or
- living in high-density settings.

The COVID-19 Quarantine Victoria Integrated Intake Assessment and Triage Service assess all referrals into the FLW Accommodation Program. For more information contact 1800 365 100 or IIATS@justice.vic.gov.au.

I am a close contact. Can I use change rooms or breakrooms when I am at work?

Care must be taken not to use **shared areas** such as break rooms or change rooms, as well as other areas where masks are not being worn (such as when eating and drinking). This is to reduce any potential exposures to other people.

Where separate facilities such as change rooms and break rooms are not available for individual use, the facilities will be made available for exempted workers at a time when other workers (patients, clients or residents) are not in the same room.

Health services are requested to provide separate break rooms for staff during this peak period where practicable, or ensure facilities are made available for exempted workers at a time when other workers (patients, clients or residents) are not in the same room.

I am a close contact. Can I still carpool with a colleague or take public transport to work?

If you are a close contact you must not carpool, and you should avoid public transport wherever possible.

You should travel directly to and from the premises where you are quarantining, as much as practicable, to minimise contact with other people.

If you need support with transport given these limitations, please engage with your employer directly.

What are the obligations of the employer if an exempt healthcare worker returns?

Before supporting a healthcare worker to attend work if a close contact, the relevant employer must give consideration as to whether the exempted worker's physical attendance is required to prevent significant risks to safe service delivery of healthcare services.

All reasonable steps should be taken to ensure the exempted healthcare worker is deployed in areas where the risk of transmission is likely to have the lowest impact. This includes ensuring that all staff working in proximity to exempted staff are wearing N95 respirators, are fit-tested, and appropriate infection prevention controls are in place to minimise risk to other staff and patients.

Facilities such as change rooms and break rooms must be made available for exempted workers or access provided at a time when other workers (patients, clients or residents) are not in the same room. If staff require additional time to access the appropriate facilities, employers should include this in break time.

Workers who are close contacts are not compelled to attend work. If a worker wishes to return to work under the eligible exemption provision from quarantine or isolation, they should inform their employer.

Employers are required to keep records of staff working under the exemption.

COVID-19 Testing and Isolation requirements for healthcare workers*

<i>Protocol</i>	1. I am a probable or confirmed COVID-19 case	2. I am a Close Contact** and have COVID-19 symptoms	3. I am a Close Contact** but have <u>no COVID-19 symptoms</u>	4. Other contacts (social, workplace or education contacts)
<i>Isolation and testing requirements</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Isolate at home for 7 days from the day you returned a positive test. 2. Notify each employer that you have tested positive for COVID-19. 3. If you have no symptoms after 7 days, you can leave isolation and return to work. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take a RAT or PCR test and isolate. If you test positive follow Protocol 1. If you test negative, continue to isolate, rest and recover until you are symptom free. 2. If you become symptom-free, follow Protocol 3 for the remainder of your isolation period. 3. On Day 6 take a RAT. If positive follow Protocol 1. If negative and symptom-free follow Protocol 3 for the remainder of quarantine period. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take a RAT test on day 1 (or PCR if unable to access RAT). If you test positive follow Protocol 1. If you test negative, you can (but are not required) return to work under the healthcare worker exemption provided you feel well, remain symptom-free and follow the additional precautions listed below. 2. You must continue to quarantine for 7 days when you are not at work. 3. On Day 6 of quarantine take a RAT. If you test positive follow Protocol 1. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No quarantine requirements. 2. Undertake a daily RAT for 5 days. If negative, you can continue to work while following the additional precautions listed below. If positive RAT, follow Protocol 1.
<i>Can I attend work?</i>	<p>No - do not return to in-person work until you have completed 7 days of quarantine, feel well and are symptom-free.</p> <p>If you are well and have no or minimal symptoms, you may be able to undertake some work/tasks remotely.</p> <p>Further obligations, including notifying the workplace, contacts and self-reporting result (if used RAT) can be found via the Checklist for COVID-19 Cases.</p>	<p>No - do not return to in-person work until you have a negative result (RAT or PCR), feel well and are symptom-free.</p> <p>You must notify each employer that you are a close contact and have symptoms of COVID-19.</p>	<p>Yes - if symptom-free you can return to work with the following safeguards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notify each employer that you are a close contact who is quarantining and intend to work under exemption. • Undertake a daily RAT and return a negative result prior to commencing work for the quarantine period. • Travel directly to and from home to work, do not carpool and where possible avoid public transport. • Wear an N95/P2 respirator at all times when required to wear a face mask. • Don't use shared break areas. 	<p>Yes - if symptom-free you can return to work with the following safeguards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake a daily RAT and return a negative result prior to commencing work for 5 days following notification as a contact. • Wear an N95/P2 respirator at all times when required to wear a face mask. • Don't use shared break areas.
<i>What leave is available to me?</i>	<p>Confirmed COVID-19 cases will have access to special leave for the 7 day isolation period.</p> <p>If an employee is still unwell after the 7 day isolation period, employees can access Personal Leave.</p> <p>Where the employee has exhausted their Personal Leave and other paid leave entitlements, access to paid Special Leave may be considered on a case-by-case basis.</p>	<p>Close contacts will have access to special leave for the 7 day quarantine period. For an employee who is unwell following the 7 day period but does not have COVID-19, the employee should use available Personal Leave.</p> <p>Where the employee has exhausted their Personal Leave and other paid leave entitlements, access to paid Special Leave may be considered on a case-by-case basis.</p>	<p>Able to continue working with safeguards in place.</p> <p>If not working, close contacts will continue to have access to special leave for the 7 day quarantine period.</p> <p>If an employee needs to care for a household contact that has COVID-19 following the 7 day quarantine period, they should access available carer's leave.</p>	<p>Able to continue working with safeguards in place.</p>

* The information on isolation requirements outlined above only applies to healthcare workers in hospitals, including ambulance and retrievals services working in connection with a hospital.

** You are a Close Contact if you are living with someone who has COVID-19, or have spent 4 hours or longer with someone in a home environment since they developed COVID-19.

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