



# Self-Isolation and Our Communities

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*Exploring solutions for expanding self-isolation options safely and controlling isolation centre costs*



## Objective

The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) is seeking input on where individuals are allowed to self-isolate. It is recognized that the existing isolation centres present social, mental, economic, and cultural challenges. The GNWT is also exploring options for reducing isolation centre costs.

Any proposed changes will be informed by current public health information on COVID-19, and by opportunities offered by new investments in technology like rapid in-territory testing, on-site testing in smaller communities, wastewater surveillance, as well as the perspectives of Indigenous and community leadership and key economic stakeholders.

## Overview

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, little was known about how the virus spread and the course the disease would take with those infected.

There was serious concern that the NWT's health care system and communities would have been unable to deal with this serious infectious disease on a scale that was being seen in other countries and provinces.

Today, the territory is in a different place. There is a better understanding of COVID-19, its risk, and the basic ways to protect each other and mitigate risk.

The GNWT has recently invested in:

- Technology allowing the territory to complete gold-standard RT-PCR COVID-19 tests more quickly in key regional hubs, as well as two options for testing that requires less specialized laboratory expertise and could deliver results in communities.
- Public health surveillance through wastewater testing covering roughly half of the NWT's population in Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Hay River, Inuvik, and Fort Simpson.
- Community-focused health system pandemic response planning to support communities should cases of COVID-19 arrive.
- Staff to implement and enforce public health orders, administer self-isolation planning, and provide timely information, while supporting and collaborating with communities.

The GNWT is considering options for expanding the locations where mandated self-isolation after return from southern travel can take place during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is informed by our investments and our better understanding of the considerable social, mental, economic, and cultural harms we have heard while processing more than 23,000 self-isolation plans.

The GNWT is also committed to pursuing options to control costs and ensure value for money while ensuring NWT residents are reasonably protected from COVID-19.



The GNWT is seeking input from Indigenous governments, community leadership, and key economic stakeholders on options for each of these decision points.

### Issue #1 - Isolation in Communities

Many residents have expressed a desire to isolate in their home communities due to social, mental, economic and cultural harms, and the GNWT wishes to address these concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, some Indigenous governments and community leaders are anxious about allowing people to isolate within communities.

1. **Are you willing to allow individuals from your community to self-isolate in their homes in your community?**
2. **Would you be more willing to allow people to complete self-isolation in your community if they had received at least one negative test for COVID-19?**
3. **What are the pros and cons of allowing individuals to self-isolate in their home community?**
4. **Under what conditions should people be able to self-isolate in their own homes?**
5. **What supports would be required for people to be able to self-isolate at home in your community?**
6. **Are you willing to allow non-residents providing essential services to enter and isolate in your community?**

### Issue #2 - Isolation Centre Costs

Businesses, residents, and governments share the GNWT's desire to reduce the costs of isolation centres, while still maintaining their availability when they are necessary.

1. **Should the GNWT continue to pay for all self-isolation centre stays for NWT residents required in a regional hub?**
2. **Should NWT residents be required to pay for isolation centres stays in a regional hub if travel is for personal or discretionary reasons?**
3. **What effect would limiting GNWT payment to required, non-discretionary stays for NWT residents have on your community?**
4. **Should NWT residents be required to pay for a portion of the costs associated with a stay in an isolation centre (i.e., pay for food) or should the GNWT limit the number of stays it pays for discretionary travel?**



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## Appendix A: Isolation Centre Locations and Costs

### Background

#### Self-isolation requirements

Currently, self-isolation planning protocols include the requirement to isolate in one of four designated communities:

- Yellowknife
- Inuvik
- Hay River
- Fort Smith

These communities were chosen because they have the easiest access to enhanced medical care which could be required for COVID-19.

There are certain instances where exceptions are granted to allow self-isolation in other communities. These exceptions are granted by the Chief Public Health Officer after a public health risk assessment completed on each individual situation.

#### Isolation Centres

To accommodate those from across all communities, the GNWT established isolation centres at hotels in each of these four centres.

The GNWT currently covers all costs for residents and those intending to become residents.

Businesses and organizations are expected to have a payment arrangement with their employees so the GNWT is not responsible for payment for any non-GNWT employees' expenses. Non-residents entering the territory for visitation or other purposes are also required to cover their own isolation costs.

These costs amount to roughly \$4000 per stay.

### Concerns

#### Unintended consequences of mandated self-isolation

These measures have worked. As of October 26 2020, there has been no loss of life from the virus in the NWT.

However, there have been unintended consequences.

Through more than 23,000 self-isolation plans, the GNWT has heard from many residents that isolating away from home is impacting their mental and social well-being throughout the pandemic.

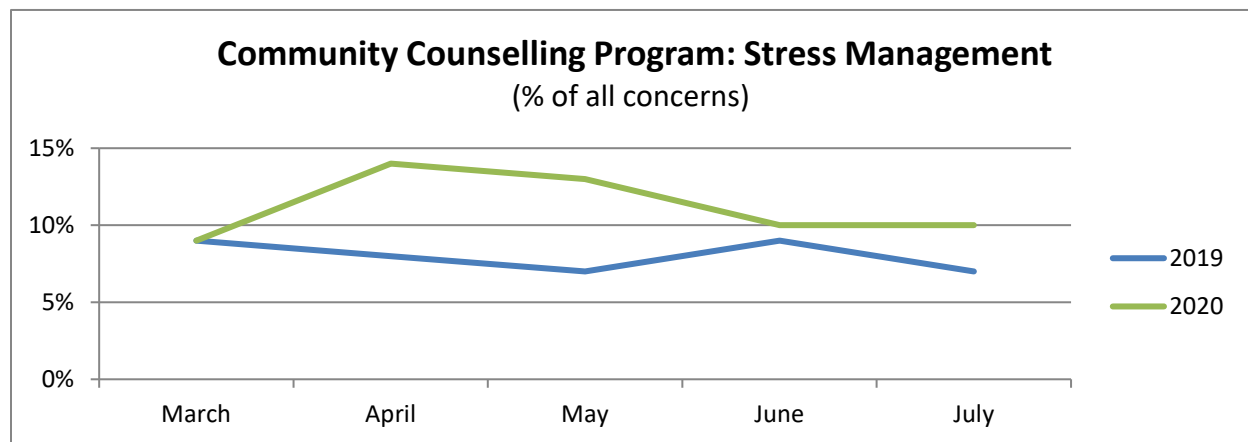


The key concerns the GNWT has heard since mandating self-isolation after returning from outside of the NWT are:

### Increased mental stress

Self-Isolation is hard on its own – and completing it away from home makes it even harder. Those already struggling with mental health have had serious struggles, and those who may not normally struggle with mental health are finding themselves in tough positions.

This can be seen in social indicators the GNWT has measured throughout the pandemic. For example, the Community Counselling Program offered by the Department of Health and Social Services has seen a spike in access for stress management purposes. While the spike has levelled off, levels of access remain higher than the prior year.



Additionally, the Health and Social Services Navigator program has documented significant mental health struggles related to stays at isolation centres. Since the program’s establishment in the summer of 2020, there have been 64 unique files opened related to isolation centre stays.

While it is difficult to attribute these specifically to isolation away from home, these indicators, along with anecdotal evidence provided by residents, suggest being away from support networks is affecting mental health negatively.

### Cultural harm

Anecdotally, the territory has heard from all demographic groups – from seniors and elders to youth – that being required to isolate away from their communities is decreasing access to things like country food and getting out-on-the-land. We know this is making the pandemic more difficult for many in our territory.

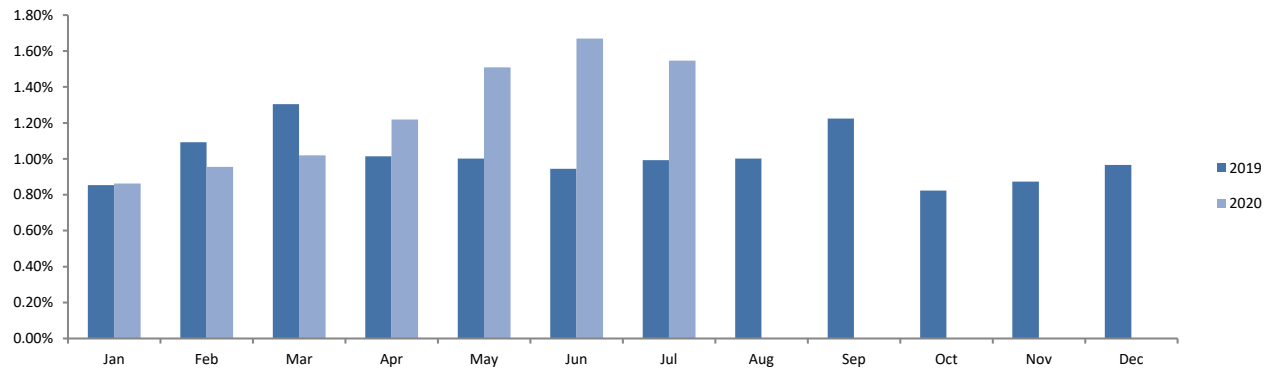
### Social harms

The territory has seen increase in harmful activities like substance abuse during the pandemic.



For example, since April, alcohol-related medical visits have increased considerably on a year-to-year comparison.

**Figure 2: Medical Visits Related to Alcohol, NWT**



It is difficult to attribute these types of concerns directly to isolation away from home. However, isolation away from home adds yet another challenge for those living with addictions.

### Economic harms

Requiring self-isolation away from communities may also have negative effects on employment prospects for residents.

Depending on the types of work people do, self-isolating away from communities may reduce their options for maintaining remote employment during the self-isolation period.

The employment rate fell 15% between February 2020 and May 2020 when the Emerging Wisely plan started to be implemented.

While employment is now rebounding, it is clear that the economy will continue to be challenged by the global pandemic.

The GNWT wishes to remove as many barriers to continued employment as possible to reduce the impact.

### High cost of isolation centres

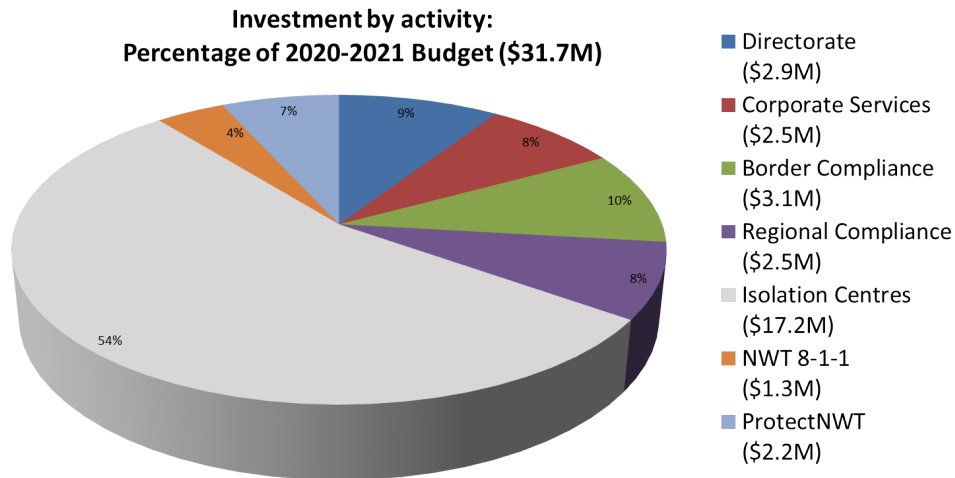
The cost of isolation centres has been a hot topic amongst residents, businesses, and governments.

The overwhelming consensus is that changes in cost-coverage must be investigated as there are concerns related to:

- Value-for-money
- Overuse for non-essential travel purposes
- Fiscal responsibility.



Currently, isolation centres represent more than half of the territory’s costs for implementing the public health orders.



When the COVID-19 Coordinating Secretariat was established, the GNWT made a commitment to find cost-savings, and it makes the most sense to start with the biggest slice of the pie.

## Options and considerations

This section is intended to explain some possible options available to the GNWT to assist Indigenous governments and community leadership and business stakeholders in understanding the evidence and factors being considered in informing decision-making.

### Issue #1 – Isolation in Communities

#### Overview

The GNWT can examine ways to safely allow isolation for residents at-home with appropriate public health interventions.

#### Considerations

- Community concerns around overcrowded housing in many communities.
  - In 2019, 5% of all homes had six people or more living in them. While this is not a direct indicator of overcrowding, it is safe to assume that it may be more challenging for people to isolate away from others within a house with more people living there.
- Anxiety in communities is high in part because of lived experience with other communicable diseases.
- Those facing difficult medical conditions will still need to isolate in isolation centres or in communities that have the appropriate medical response the individual’s needs.





- With expanded rapid testing capacity, there is the possibility to consider testing interventions like targeted screening and follow up, including testing on day 1, 7 and 10, depending on circumstances and risk.

### Limitations

- Isolation centres will still be required and residents will still be required to isolate in regional centres under certain circumstances.
- The Chief Public Health Officer (CPHO) will produce guidelines on appropriate isolation spaces. This could include:
  - Number of rooms
  - Number of household members
  - Ability to isolate away from others in home and community
- The CPHO will develop a guidance and assessment process for those facing medical challenges. It will remain important for people facing certain medical challenges to continue to isolate close to enhanced medical care.

### Potential approaches

#### *Targeted screening for returning travellers*

With expanding testing capacity, public health is in a position to consider targeted screening strategies.

Targeted screening means testing certain people for certain reasons even if they don't have symptoms of COVID-19.

#### Example

Right now, the GNWT completes targeted screening on certain essential workers who are required to go to work right away after arrival. These include:

- Healthcare workers
- Dentists
- Social service workers
- Corrections officers
- RCMP officers

This is coupled with other protective measures like continuous indoor mask use within the 14 day incubation period to further protect communities as well as mandatory self-isolation at residence when not working

#### How targeted screening for travellers could work

A strategy would need to be developed to ensure people isolating in smaller communities would be assessed for testing early in their isolation period.

This could provide some comfort to communities that those who are isolating in communities have at minimum been screened on first day of arriving into the community.



Individuals would still be required to complete the full 14-day self-isolation period after arrival in the NWT unless they have been provided an exemption to work within this time with additional mitigation measures like masking and self-isolation off-shift, or have been granted one for compassionate reasons.

#### False negatives

All public health measures, especially the self-isolation period remains extremely important even with a targeted screening program because it would not eliminate all risk.

False negative tests are a reality with any communicable disease. No technology is perfect.

The likelihood of false negatives is influenced by timing of the test since a person was infected. A [study](#) by researchers at Johns Hopkins University looked at 1330 samples from RT-PCR tests. This is the most common type of test for COVID-19, and it is what the Northwest Territories uses for most COVID-19 tests.

They found that during the first four days of infection before symptoms appeared, the chance of getting a false negative result ranged from 100 per cent on the first day, to 67 per cent on the fourth day. After symptoms appeared, the rate of false negative results dropped to 38 per cent by the fifth day and 20 per cent by the eighth day.

#### Still protective

While a 100% likelihood of a false negative test sounds overwhelming, it does not mean that testing people soon after they arrive in the territory does not lower risk.

This is in-part because the chance is quite low that someone arriving in the NWT contracted the virus on the same day they travelled. More likely, the person would have contracted the virus earlier, and thus the test would be more accurate.

It is also important to note that in most cases, symptoms of COVID-19 develop within seven days of contracting the virus. Testing is much more accurate in patients showing any symptoms – even mild ones.

This means that screening people can provide some assurances that people are unlikely to be infectious with COVID-19 at that time – but also highlights the importance of staying home, and not going to work, school, or other crowded settings, even if you're feeling a little bit unwell.

However, self-isolation is still crucial because there is no guarantee that a negative test will mean a person does not develop COVID-19.

Testing on the first day of arrival into a community does not replace the requirement for 14 day mandatory self-isolation OR for reporting of any symptoms on Day 2, 6, 10 and 14. If a traveller has COVID 19 symptoms, they are required to call their healthcare provider and report the symptoms immediately. All household members would be required to self-isolate with the traveller if there were any occasions where self-isolation was breached.



#### Additional screening

Additional repeat testing throughout self-isolation could also offer more assurance. A testing strategy is in the process of being developed by the Northwest Territories Health and Social Service Authority and the Office of the CPHO to maximize the opportunity for case identification.

#### Work being done

The Office of the CPHO is currently reviewing evidence about the best way to implement a targeted screening program in the NWT.

#### *Guidelines for safe isolation spaces*

Researchers have found that when someone in a household contracts COVID-19, another member of the household will contract COVID-19 about one-in-five or 20% of the time. In smaller NWT communities with household crowding this number would be higher. COVID outbreaks on Indigenous reserves in Northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba have shown that they can be up to 10 times differentially impacted compared to their provincial counterparts.

To provide additional comfort and advice to communities, the GNWT will develop guidance on safe isolation spaces, and incorporate it into how decisions are made about whether isolation centre stays in larger communities are required.

#### *Guidelines on which communities are appropriate for isolation*

The GNWT understands that not all communities are going to be appropriate for self-isolation or be comfortable or prepared to host self-isolators.

Based on local health system capacity, remoteness, and input from leadership, the CPHO may create guidelines about which communities have suitable conditions for self-isolation at this time.

#### *Expanding designated isolation communities*

Currently, anyone living in designated isolation communities is able to complete their self-isolation at home after travel if they are able to safely isolate in their home. There are some limited circumstances where a person living in a larger centre may still be required to isolate in an isolation centre, such as where they have an at risk person living in their home or their home is overcrowded.

Some larger communities have expressed some interest in becoming designated isolation communities themselves.

#### Necessary work

The GNWT would need to work with communities to identify their capacity for providing safe isolation spaces and healthcare, including testing capacity, and how to safely access additional outside health support if required.

#### Benefit to communities

Increasing the number of communities where people can isolate would allow more residents to isolate at home.



It would also allow for residents to have the option to isolate in communities which are closer to home where they may have existing supports. This could help ease some of the mental and social stress inherent in isolating away from home.

## Issue #2 - Isolation Centre Costs

### Limiting cost-coverage of isolation centre stays

The GNWT is considering reducing or eliminating cost-coverage for stays at isolation centres for stays which are not required as a matter of GNWT policy or medical recommendation.

### Considerations

#### Developing guidance

The GNWT will continue to cover all isolation centre costs for anyone who is required to stay in an isolation centre because of public health orders, medical recommendation, or GNWT policy.

As part of this process, the GNWT will develop guidance for what non-essential travel means considering various social (i.e. compassionate or professional considerations) and medical (i.e. necessity of travel for medical purposes) scenarios.

#### Maintaining options

Isolation centres will need to remain a part of the GNWT's response to COVID-19. The policy questions at hand is how to reduce the costs for taxpayers and do it in a way that is fair and equitable to residents.

#### Public health considerations

In the course of public health order creation, there will be consideration given to healthcare capacity in communities, and the ability to move patients quickly should they require enhanced care. This will help inform cost-coverage policies.

#### Community-level health system response

The [Health and Social Services Authorities Pandemic Response Plan](#) has a good process based on evidence about COVID-19 for responding to cases in every community across the territory should they arise.

#### Urgency of decision

With holiday and winter road seasons approaching, people across the NWT are beginning to make travel plans. Knowing the plan for isolation centre cost-coverage with enough time to change or re-consider holiday plans is important for the well-being of residents.

### Benefit to communities

A broad consensus has been communicated to the GNWT that isolation centre cost payments are too liberal.



Community members are looking for the GNWT to take action to lower costs. Investigating what costs are covered and why will help get a better deal for taxpayers, and avoid unnecessary or over-use of these facilities.

By setting clear standards for who pays for what and when, community members can make informed decisions on travel.



## Appendix B: Empowering Communities to Lower Risk

While a great deal of the focus has been placed on the GNWT's response, it is important for local leadership to know that there are simple, effective ways to address risk in communities.

These can be implemented by communities to safely mitigate risk for community-members and prevent outbreaks from occurring.

Communities can also be empowered to reduce their risk of introducing COVID into their homes, schools or workplaces by adhering to the following overarching public health measures that remain in place to protect us all. Residents who have not travelled are expected to stay home when they are sick. If anyone is named as a contact or part of a COVID-19 outbreak, they are to immediately self-isolate and contact a healthcare provider.

Everyone should follow all recommendations from healthcare providers and the CPHO, as well as organizations that have identified specific mitigations - for example, some businesses now require non-medical masks to be worn. Following these recommendations and mitigation measures provides an extra layer of protection in case the initial measure of self-isolation fails.

The GNWT wants to encourage and support Indigenous governments and community leadership in making informed community-level choices to accommodate the unique risk tolerance levels of each community.

This work can help ease anxiety for leadership and community residents who may feel anxious about people isolating in smaller communities.

### Local non-medical mask mandates

While the CPHO is currently choosing to provide strong recommendations on non-medical mask use and working to encourage their use through supportive communications, local leadership could choose to implement non-medical mask mandates.

### *How it can help*

Wearing non-medical masks have been found to be a powerful tool for limiting transmission of COVID-19.

This is because when people wear them, it stops their respiratory droplets created when they talk, laugh, cough, or sneeze from traveling further. Since COVID-19 is believed to spread primarily through respiratory droplets, this can make a big impact.

While the results of studies vary, it has been found that if non-medical masks are worn properly, they can significantly reduce the likelihood of passing along a virus.

The protective effect is enhanced when a higher proportion of the population makes the choice to mask up. By making that choice, we can protect others, and others can protect us.



Combining non-medical masking with basic public health precautions like maintaining six feet (2 metres) of physical distance, frequent hand-washing, keeping crowds small and spaces large, and staying home when sick can have a highly-protective effect for communities – even when COVID-19 is prevalent.

### *Rationale*

Examples from around the globe show that local non-medical mask mandates work better than ones applied to broad communities.

This is because people trust local leaders more than they trust those in central authorities. They know and have confidence in their local leaders, and therefore they are more likely to follow rules made at the grassroots level.

Public health strongly recommends non-medical mask use and is confident that practicing proper mask use on a widespread level would lower risk to communities no matter the COVID-19 situation.

Community leadership could also feel confident in telling people in their communities that this is something which could help prevent others who may not be following other rules from infecting others in the community.

There are several local manufacturers of non-medical masks in the NWT. Contact information for these local manufacturers can be found on the [GNWT's COVID Response website](#).



## Appendix C: Fundamental Public Health Measures

The GNWT will continue to drive home simple, fundamental steps everyone can take to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 in the NWT.

- **Prioritize physical distance:** Keeping two metres, or six feet apart from others will keep you and those around you safer.
- **Keep your circles small, and your spaces large:** Smaller crowds and bigger rooms limit the amount of people who could contract COVID-19. Outside is always best when getting together.
- **When it's tough to keep your distance, wear a non-medical mask:** It's like covering your sneezes and coughs all the time – even when you may not realize your respiratory droplets are spreading. When everyone does it, we're all better protected.
- **Keep coughs and sneezes to yourself:** Use a tissue or a flexed elbow to keep your respiratory droplets from getting to others.
- **If you're sick, stay home:** Even if it's mild. Take the [online self-assessment](#) or **call ahead** to your local [healthcare centre](#) to be assessed for COVID-19 testing.
- **If you're supposed to self-isolate, don't go:** Do not go to public places, other households, or anywhere you could come face-to-face with those you are not self-isolating with.
- **If you've been notified you are a contact of a case or outbreak, isolate at-home immediately and call your local public health unit or [health care centre](#):** As cases across Canada accelerate, there's a possibility that individuals may receive notifications through their COVID-19 Alert app, from airlines, or from public health officials that they may be a contact of a case or outbreak. Health care professionals need to know, and may provide you with additional advice.

By leading together, and sharing this advice regularly, everyone in the NWT can be better prepared to push back against COVID-19.





## Appendix D: How to Self-Isolate at Home

Self-isolation means staying in your place of isolation (home, isolation centre, private suite) and limiting your contact with others.

### Stay home

- You must avoid any situation where you could infect others
- This means staying away from work, school, childcare centres, closed facilities, grocery stores, pharmacies, out on the land, cabins, outdoor visits, or any other public spaces.
- This also includes staying away from other members of your household. This means staying at least six feet away at all times, and preferably in a separate area of the house.
- If you do not have any symptoms, you may go outdoors for fresh air when by yourself or with other self-isolating household members
- If you or anyone else in your home develops symptoms of COVID-19, everyone in your household must stay home and isolate away from each other as much as possible until assessed by a healthcare provider.
- **If you do have symptoms, you are NOT to go outside and must follow the guidance on mandatory isolation.**
- If you must go out in an emergency, you must wear a non-medical mask, and limit your time out as much as possible.

### No visitors

- Do not have visitors to your home.
- It is okay for friends, family, or delivery drivers to drop food off or other things you may need as long as they stay 2 metres, or six feet, away.
- Avoid contact with older adults and other people with chronic medical conditions (e.g. immune deficiencies, lung problems, heart disease, and diabetes).

### Keep your distance

- Stay away from other household members (at least 2 meters apart) and use a separate bathroom if you have one. If you must share toilet facilities, they should be cleaned daily.
- Avoid sharing household items. You should not share drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, pillows or other items with people in your home. After using these items you should clean them.

### Cover your coughs and sneezes

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing or cough or sneeze into your sleeve/elbow.
- You and other household members should follow **healthy respiratory practices**.
- Throw used tissues immediately into the garbage and wash your hands.
- You can **wear a face covering or mask** to reduce the risk of spreading infection.



### **Wash your hands**

- You and your family should wash your hands frequently.
- Wash them after coughing or sneezing, if they are dirty, using the bathroom, or before eating.
- Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based sanitizer if water is not available.

### **Be careful when touching garbage**

- All waste can go into regular garbage bins.
- When emptying the garbage, take care to not touch used tissues with your hands. Lining the garbage with a plastic bag makes waste disposal easier and safer.
- Clean your hands with soap and water after emptying the garbage.

### **Clean and disinfect**

- Clean your home with regular household cleaners.
- Clean regularly touched items such as toilets, sink taps, handles, doorknobs, light switches, cellphones, bedside tables, etc. on a daily basis.