Information about COVID-19 testing

1. Who decides if someone with symptoms gets tested?

The decision to test (or not test) an individual is made based on the clinical assessment of a health care provider.

Anyone with symptoms compatible with COVID-19 can be assessed and tested. However, as per Provincial testing guidance, certain high risk/vulnerable groups of people (for example LTC residents) who are symptomatic may be prioritized for testing, based on local assessment resources and lab capacity.

2. Who is responsible for testing in Halton? Who completes the testing?

Halton residents primarily get tested through local hospital assessment centres. There are 4 assessment centres in Halton. These centres are available in every municipality and are managed by Halton Healthcare (assessment centres in Halton Hills, Milton and Oakville) and Joseph Brant Hospital (assessment centre in Burlington).

Halton Region paramedics (through the Region’s Community Paramedic program) test some individuals who are unable to attend an assessment centre, for example, due to mobility or other physical limitations.

Mass testing in long-term care homes is being conducted by Community Paramedics with support from local hospital staff.

3. What is the process for testing an individual?

Multiple health care partners are involved in the testing process.

The initial screening/assessment of an individual happens in one of three ways:

- **Primary care provider**: They make an appointment with their primary care provider and, based on their clinical assessment can be referred to a local assessment centre for testing.
- **Assessment Centre**: They call an assessment centre directly to schedule an appointment for assessment.
- **Public Health**: They call Halton Region Public Health and:
  
  a) are referred to make an appointment at a local assessment centre; or
  
  b) testing is arranged by community paramedics if required

When at an assessment centre, individuals are assessed by a physician and decision to test is based on that assessment.

4. Have any COVID-19 supply shortages affected Public Health’s ability to perform their duties?

There have been periodic shortages in swabs and other testing supplies, both at the provincial and hospital levels, which can cause delays in testing. Currently, Public Health has sufficient supplies to complete testing of the LTC homes.

5. Who is responsible for ensuring supplies are available?
The Province provides Public Health with testing supplies through the Public Health Ontario lab. Hospitals have their own process of acquiring supplies which is supported by Ontario Health.

6. Why does the Provincial lab not always run at capacity?

This is a new network, and several labs have joined in a very short amount of time in order to support increased testing capacity. This would be challenging for anyone and there are going to be issues whenever you experience a major change such as this one.

7. Is Public Health responsible for the testing numbers falling short?

Halton Region Public Health is doing everything it can to ensure everyone who needs testing has access to it.

Testing is a multi-step process, which includes the ability to perform tests; transport specimens; process samples; and report results in a timely manner. It has many components and involves many people and organizations. Public Health represents a small component within the larger process—we facilitate the testing—but as you can imagine, all these steps cannot happen simultaneously. It takes time. By the time testing data is recorded into provincial data systems, it may not accurately reflect the number of tests that have actually occurred on the ground.

8. Who tracks the number of tests in Halton region?

Halton Region Public Health tracks the number of tests performed in LTC homes as part of the mass testing and tests performed as part of an outbreak investigation. Ontario Health and hospitals track testing from Assessment centres and within the hospitals.

9. How many tests have been completed to date in Halton region?

More than 8,300 residents have been tested in Halton as of May 6, 2020. This information is available through Halton’s bi-weekly COVID-19 Surveillance Reports, available on Mondays and Thursdays at halton.ca/COVID19. You can also sign up to receive these reports by email.

10. Is Halton Region Public Health on track for testing all Long-Term Care homes by the Provincial target of May 15, 2020?

Yes, we are track to meet deadline. In collaboration with our LTC homes and hospital partners, we have created a schedule to ensure all LTC homes are tested by May 15, 2020. As of end day on May 7, we have completed testing in 9 LTC homes.

11. Will we be doing testing in all retirement homes and congregate living settings as the Premier has said?

Halton Region Public Health is currently following the guidance received from the Province through the Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH). To date, we have been directed by the Province to complete testing in all long-term care homes; and this is being done. Should new direction be received from the Province, Halton Region Public Health will plan for local implementation of the direction.
12. Can we increase the testing being done in Halton?

Public Health continues to work with its hospital partners to ensure everyone who requires testing has access to it.

Several factors can contribute to the number of people getting tested, including but not limited to: assessment centre capacity, lab capacity, availability of supplies, provincial testing requirements, and more.

13. Who should be tested for COVID-19?

Anyone with symptoms compatible with COVID-19 can be assessed and tested.

As per Provincial testing guidance, the following groups of people who are symptomatic may be prioritized for testing, based on local assessment resources and lab capacity:

- Hospital inpatients;
- Residents living in Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes;
- Residents of other congregate settings and institutions;
- Persons working in congregate settings and institutions;
- Healthcare workers/other caregivers/care providers/first responders;
- Persons living in same household of healthcare workers/other care providers/first responders;
- Remote/isolated/rural/Indigenous communities;
- Patients requiring frequent contact with the healthcare system such as patients undergoing chemotherapy/cancer treatment/ dialysis, pre-/post-transplant, pregnant persons, neonates);
- Essential workers; and
- Cross-border workers, for example, workers who reside in Ontario, but who cross the Canadian border for work.

The majority of testing for individuals in the community in Halton is done at local hospital assessment centres. This information is tracked by the hospitals and Ontario Health.

14. Why is testing restricted to certain priority populations?

Testing is not restricted, however prioritization of certain groups may occur (see question #13 above), based on local assessment resources and lab capacity.

Halton Region Public Health continues to follow testing guidance as provided by the Ministry of Health.

15. What is the role of Public Health during COVID-19?

Halton Region Public Health:

- Performs case management – Public Health follows up with each positive case in the community, provides guidance on self-isolation, and conducts regular check-in calls to ensure the individual is safe and maintaining self-isolation.
- performs contact tracing - when there is a confirmed case, Public Health conducts an investigation to identify all close contacts of the case. We follow up with people who may
have had close contact with the case, directing them self-isolate or to arrange for testing as required. This is an immense undertaking for Public Health, but is an essential part of stopping the spread and keeping people safe.

- performs outbreak management including organizing mass testing of staff and residents in long-term care homes, outbreak prevention and management (providing guidance to homes, workplaces and other congregate settings), and infection prevention and control visits to strengthen IPAC measures in these settings.
- educates the public regarding steps they can take to reduce the spread of COVID-19;
- assesses the risk among residents with symptoms and determines what further care is required;
- coordinates testing (when required) at an appropriate location;
- ensures those who are showing symptoms understand how to reduce the risk of transmission to others; and
- provides guidance to cases and their contacts, such as self-isolation protocols and monitoring for symptoms to minimize the risk of spread.
- Provides guidance to community partners on ways to reduce transmission in various settings in the community.

16. Has the CMOH contacted us to say testing in Halton LTC is lagging?

We have not been notified by the CMOH of any issues related to Halton’s COVID-19 response including testing in LTC. We are on track to meet the provincial deadline of May 15, 2020.

17. Is Halton on track to test all residents and staff in LTC (have all surveillance completed) by the May 15 deadline?

Yes, we are track to meet deadline. In collaboration with our LTC homes and hospital partners, we have created a schedule to ensure all LTC homes are tested by May 15, 2020. Currently we have completed testing in seven LTC homes (as of end of day on May 6, 2020).

18. What about emergency child care centres? When did we start testing them?

We have worked with our hospital assessment centres to organize testing for child care centre staff. We have sent notices to all currently open emergency child care centres, alerting staff to be tested. Child care centre staff can go to an assessment centre with their letter from public health to gain access to testing.

19. Our website says we have worked with all 46 long-term care and retirement homes in Halton – what does that mean?

We have communicated with all 46 homes in Halton. We provide the following supports to long-term care and retirement homes:

- Outbreak prevention and management
- Infection prevention and control visits to strengthen IPAC measures within the homes

We are also organizing mass testing in the long-term care homes. We have developed plans for each home based on risk assessment, and have a schedule we are following to ensure we meet the provincial deadline of May 15, 2020.