

Contact Tracing: Stemming the Spread of COVID-19

Like many viruses, COVID-19 can be spread before any symptoms arise. For that reason, it is essential that anyone who has been exposed to the virus be made aware of that exposure as soon as possible and self-isolate to prevent spreading the infection.

It's possible, once you open your office, that you will treat a patient who is COVID-19 positive despite having no symptoms. Exposure to this asymptomatic patient can spread the virus. Researchers estimate that nearly half the COVID-19 infections in [one study](#) arose after exposure to an asymptomatic person.

Contact tracing is a means of notifying people that they may have been exposed to the virus. The goal is to identify contacts, notify them of the potential exposure, educate them about symptoms and self-care, and encourage them to self-isolate in order to stop the spread of the virus.

Why is Contact Tracing Necessary?

Contact tracing is a critical step in slowing the spread of COVID-19. As our communities begin to reopen and social contacts increase so will the opportunities to transmit infection. To see how easily this virus can spread, consider [this report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), which outlines 15 COVID-19 cases, including three deaths, stemming from contact with one person.

In February, Patient A attended the funeral of a family friend. Though Patient A had mild respiratory symptoms, he or she had not been diagnosed with COVID-19. Patient A shared dinner with two of the decedent's family members the night before the funeral and attended the funeral the next day. Within six days, three of the people Patient A came in contact with contracted COVID-19, one of whom subsequently died. Three days after the funeral, Patient A went to a family birthday party, where he or she came in contact with nine other people. Over the following week, seven of those party-goers developed COVID-19 of which two died. Three of those who were infected at the party attended a church service, which resulted in further spread of the disease. An additional caregiver to one of the sick persons and a household contact also became ill.

Within three weeks, spread of the virus sparked by one person with mild respiratory symptoms resulted in 15 other COVID-19 cases, including three deaths.

What's involved?

No definitive window has been established to determine how many days a person infected with COVID-19 may shed the virus prior to becoming symptomatic. However, some researchers suggest contact tracing be based on a timeframe up to 3 days prior to the display of any symptoms.¹ In other words, once a person has developed symptoms, anyone they had been in contact with over the previous three days would need to be notified of a potential exposure.

The CDC has developed [several principles](#) involved in contact tracing. Among these are:

- Notifying contacts as soon as possible of the possible exposure
- Maintaining patient confidentiality by only informing the contact that he or she may have been exposed—never identifying the source patient
- Encouraging contacts to stay home and maintain social distance (at least 6 feet) from others for at least 14 days from the last exposure incident
- Informing contacts that they could spread the virus even if they are not ill.

The CDC goes on to say that contacts should seek medical attention should they develop symptoms such as fever, cough or shortness of breath.

Disclaimer. These materials are intended to provide helpful information to dentists and dental team members. They are in no way a substitute for actual professional advice based upon your unique facts and circumstances. ***This content is not intended or offered, nor should it be taken, as legal or other professional advice.*** You should always consult with your own professional advisors (e.g. attorney, accountant, insurance carrier). To the extent ADA has included links to any third party web site(s), ADA intends no endorsement of their content and implies no affiliation with the organizations that provide their content. Further, ADA makes no representations or warranties about the information provided on those sites.