



TRINITY COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Contact Tracing

In light of the COVID-19 outbreak many of us may be hearing terms that are unfamiliar. One term that is heard regularly in official discussions is contact tracing. Contact tracing is a key part of the United States' COVID-19 containment strategy and an important epidemiological tool to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

Basically, contact tracing is identifying sick people, isolating them (separating them from those who are well) and then tracing everyone with whom they have been in contact and put those people in quarantine (separating and restricting the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick).

Below are frequently asked questions and answers about contact tracing.

Q: Who uses contact tracing?

Contact tracing is a core strategy used by local and state health departments to prevent the spread of communicable diseases in a community or population. Examples of some communicable diseases are: COVID-19, tuberculosis, and measles. There are many more.

Q: Why is contact tracing necessary?

Contact tracing enables health authorities to connect with close contacts of individuals who have been exposed to a COVID-19 infected individual and isolate them, helping to break the chain of transmission of the virus. Because some people experience only minor symptoms from COVID-19, this is particularly important to prevent large clusters of cases developing which can quickly put pressure on and overload healthcare services in specific regions.

Q: How is contact tracing done?

Contact tracing is very time- and resource-intensive and this relies on the number of people who have come in contact with the infected individual. COVID-19 complicates things further because facts about the infectiousness of the coronavirus have been unfolding and changing since it was discovered.



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Contact tracing steps include:

- A contact tracer or disease investigator makes contact with the person reported to have a communicable disease. That person is asked to recall everyone they have had close contact with during the timeframe that they may have been infectious. These identified people are called “contacts.”
- The disease investigator reaches out to the identified contacts to inform them that they may have been exposed to the infectious person.
- The disease investigator provides contacts with information and education about their exposure risk and provides contacts with instructions on how to observe and monitor themselves for illness. Contacts may also be told that they are quarantined for a certain amount of time.

Q: Is there some sort of tracking mechanism on cellular phones and devices that is used to trace people who are infected with COVID-19 or have been in contact with an infected person?

Other countries have been using technology on cellular phones and devices to assist with controlling the spread of the disease and requiring people to report their locations and symptoms through an application (app). At this time, Trinity County is not using this type of technology or apps. Contact tracing is done over the phone and on a very personal and privacy-protected level. Establishing a patient relationship through phone calls, interviews, and continued conversations about how patients are feeling and experiencing symptoms are tried-and-true public health methods that are very effective. They also allow for patient assessment and instructions from licensed public health nursing staff if symptoms and conditions worsen. Monitoring is done by telephone daily on laboratory confirmed COVID-19 patients that are under isolation until determined by licensed medical staff that isolation can be discontinued.

Q: Is contact tracing information shared with anyone?

The idea of contact tracing has prompted concerns regarding medical privacy. Public health officials take those concerns seriously. The health department is ethically and legally bound to protect health information and use it only for public health purposes. Patient privacy is safeguarded by law under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) which Public Health Departments must adhere to and patient information/identity is never shared during contact tracing.



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Q: What is surveillance and what is the purpose of surveillance?

Surveillance is the ongoing collection of data such as the numbers of people who have contacted a type of disease, their demographics such as location, age, ethnicity, and gender. It is used to detect diseases, prevent immediate disease spread and to project the future of the disease and its potential. The purpose for surveillance is for public health personnel to determine the need for change in the way we do things, how we lead and manage decisions. The surveillance being done concerning COVID-19 helps the public understand the prevalence/importance of the disease within our own community.

Q: If I am told to isolate because I have COVID-19 what does that mean and where do I go?

Isolation is separating the sick from those who are well. Home isolation is appropriate for people who are confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19, who do not need to be hospitalized, and who can be cared for at home, the CDC states. It is also for previously hospitalized patients with confirmed COVID-19 who are medically stable and able to go home. Remember to stay home until your health care professional and public health officials determine when you can stop home isolation.

For more information about COVID-19, go to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>, or visit www.trinitycounty.org.