



Frequently Asked Questions: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Contact Tracing

Updated May 15, 2020

What is contact tracing?

Contact tracing is the process of identifying people who may have come into contact with an individual with an infectious disease. The process involves identifying infected people, determining who they have been in close contact with while infected and asking people who are potentially infected to stay home until it is clear they are not sick.

For the coronavirus 2019 pandemic, contact tracing begins with an interview of the positive COVID-19 patient and obtaining details regarding the patient's contacts, who they have interacted with and where they have gone recently. The next step involves locating people with whom the infected person has interacted during a two-week period.

What happens after the list of contacts is established?

Following the interview with the infected patient, other individuals who came into close contact with the infected person will be contacted and guidance provided regarding self-isolation and monitoring for symptoms. This process was developed to help prevent further person-to-person spread of the infection.

After they are informed of the exposure, the contact tracer typically monitors individuals by telephone or videotelephony, with decisive action taken to test and quarantine anyone who develops symptoms.

Why is contact tracing necessary?

Contact tracing is an essential tool used to decrease the spread of infectious disease and has been effectively employed during other health emergencies, such as the H1N1 pandemic in America and Ebola outbreaks in Africa. Effective use of contact tracing is a critical step in decreasing the number of COVID-19 cases. In fact, contact tracing was one of the "four building blocks" of public health response described by Governor Larry Hogan as critical in reopening Maryland - along with securing adequate supplies of PPE, expanding testing and ensuring Maryland had ample hospital surge capacity for infections.

Who conducts contact tracing?

Maryland has finalized a contract to conduct statewide contact tracing for COVID-19 with NORC at the University of Chicago, one of the largest independent social research organizations in the United States. Contact tracing programs will be facilitated by NORC in coordination with the Maryland Department of Health and local health departments throughout the state.

How many contact tracers are actively tracking movements and locations of positive COVID-19 patients? Will this number of contact tracers increase?

Initially, there were 250 contact tracers engaged through the local health departments who were conducting interviews with COVID-19 positive patients in Maryland. That number has since been doubled to 500. In addition, the NORC team will bring on another 500 contact tracers, bringing the total to 1,000 statewide.

Does contact tracing damage my privacy and violate HIPAA laws?

No. Contact tracers take extreme measures to protect the privacy of infected patients and maintain strict adherence to HIPAA regulations. During a trace investigation, a person will be notified that they may have come into contact with an infected individual, but the infected person's name is not disclosed and minimal information is conveyed.

What kinds of questions might I be asked by a contact tracer?

If you are called by a contact tracer, they will ask about your health, any potential symptoms you may have, and the duration of those symptoms. They may ask about your whereabouts for a specific period of time. If you had close contact with others during that time, they will ask for names and contact information for those individuals. The investigator will ask you to be as specific as possible about the nature and location of your interactions with others, as a way of understanding who might be potentially infected.

What kind of questions will a contact tracer never ask?

A contact investigator will never ask you for your social security number, financial or bank account information, or personal details unrelated to COVID-19. They will not ask for photographs or videos of any kind. They will not ask for your passwords.

What if I'm called, told to isolate and need assistance?

Call your local health department for help connecting with county resources that are available to you during your quarantine period.

How do I know that a call from a contact tracer is not a scam? Is there a way to verify who is calling?

With the prevalence of telephone scams and other fraud, we understand people’s reluctance to answer detailed questions to someone who calls to ask about their movements and contact with friends and loved ones. Maryland’s contact tracing efforts have several methods by which you can verify the identity of the caller.

When your phone rings, the caller ID will read “MD COVID” on your screen. Depending on whether your contact investigator is calling directly from NORC or your local health department, there will also be a list of phone numbers you will be given to verify the caller’s identity.

For accurate, updated information about COVID-19, please visit:

Maryland Department of Health: coronavirus.maryland.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: CDC.gov/coronavirus