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News

July 30, 2020

Southwestern Public Health issues letter of instruction to mandate face coverings in enclosed public spaces

Businesses in Oxford County, Elgin County and City of St. Thomas to require face coverings

Southwestern Public Health has issued a letter of instruction for all businesses in Oxford County, Elgin County and the City of St. Thomas to mandate face coverings in enclosed public spaces.

The instruction takes effect at 11:59 p.m. on July 30th and includes a one-week grace period to allow businesses time to prepare. Policies must be in place by 12:00 a.m. on August 6th.

All commercial establishments, public transit, and commercial service vehicles are instructed to implement two policies: one that requires everyone to wear face coverings while in enclosed public spaces, and a second for public health measures in enclosed employee spaces that are not accessible to the public. This second policy focuses on physical distancing, face coverings when physical distancing is not possible, enhanced cleaning and disinfecting, and requiring staff who are sick to stay home while advising they be tested for COVID-19.

Southwestern Public Health also recommends municipalities pass bylaws for a consistent approach to face coverings across the region, subject to timing for local councils to meet.

“Our response has evolved throughout this pandemic, yet it has always been centred on measures equal to local risks,” says Dr. Lock. “Our confirmed cases have increased, most public spaces are open, and we have more opportunities to interact with each other. Face coverings will help manage these risks.”

When it comes to enforcement, Southwestern Public Health and its municipal partners will take an education-first approach. However, individuals and corporations that do not comply could face fines.

“Our hope is the community will share the responsibility of containing COVID-19 by following these policies,” says Dr. Lock. “It is an incredibly caring act to wear a face covering because it protects other people from your germs. My mask protects you, and your mask protects me.”

Certain individuals are exempt from wearing a face covering, including children under 2 or children under 5 if they cannot be persuaded to wear one by a caregiver, people with health conditions that make it difficult to wear one, people in situations where a face covering would limit the ability to breathe (such as swimming), and people who cannot put on or remove a face covering without help.

Businesses cannot ask anyone for proof of exemption. “Please be understanding if someone cannot wear a face covering due to health conditions,” says Dr. Lock, who adds face coverings are not intended to replace physical distancing.

The letter of instruction will remain in effect until further notice. Learn more at www.swpublichealth.ca/WorkplacesCOVID-19.

About Southwestern Public Health

Southwestern Public Health works with its partners to ensure the health of the whole community. Our programs respond to public health emergencies; promote healthy lifestyles; help prevent injuries, illness and disease in the community; and promote positive change and social conditions that improve health. Southwestern Public Health delivers mandated programs under the **Ontario Public Health Standards** and is regulated by the **Ontario Health Protection and Protection Act**. The health unit maintains primary locations in Woodstock and St. Thomas. For more information, visit www.swpublichealth.ca.

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