

ALLEGHENY COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

COVID-19 Fact Sheet

Contact Tracing

The Health Department's team of case investigators and contact tracers work in collaboration. Case investigators and contact tracers currently work under the Bureau of Assessment Statistics and Epidemiology.

Case investigation involves calling all positive cases of COVID-19. Case investigators ask a series of questions about the person's symptoms, whether they have sought medical care, events they may have attended, and with whom they have had close contact. Case investigators provide the list of close contacts to contact tracers, who call the close contacts.

A close contact is someone who lives with the person, regularly spends time in that person's house or has been within 6 feet of that person for 15 or more minutes in a time period that starts 48 hours before that person experienced symptoms of COVID-19.

The number of close contacts for the county's first cases of COVID-19 were large, including family, friends, and workplace colleagues. Through stay-at-home orders and physical distancing, the number of close contacts has shrunk. Recently, each case has had an average of 0.5 to 1 close contact, meaning some positive cases have had no close contacts to report.

Contact tracers call each close contact and advise them to self-quarantine and monitor for symptoms for 14 days. Contact tracers enroll close contacts in Sara Alert. Sara Alert is a standards-based, open source tool that allows public health officials to monitor individuals at risk for COVID-19, enabling real-time insights and increased reporting capability for early containment of the virus. The tool allows close contacts, to report daily symptoms through web, text, email or robocall. If a close contact develops symptoms, the health department calls them and advises them to seek testing.

Contact tracers also ask about potential probable cases. If a household contact, someone living in the same house or someone who regularly visits a person's house, is symptomatic, they collect information so the person can be entered into our disease surveillance system as a probable case and advise the individual to isolate. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention definition for a probable case is used: probable cases are individuals who had COVID-19 symptoms and had close contact with a case but did not have a positive test.

Contact tracers can call about 15 people a day. It is important they pay close attention to detail and can be empathetic when talking to close contacts.

The Health Department trained employees from other divisions of the department to staff its contact tracing and case investigation teams. Thirty students from the University of Pittsburgh Medical School also assisted with case investigations. The Health Department has also trained Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) volunteers to perform contact tracing.

The department is assessing its ongoing needs for contact tracing as continued efforts will be important to limit the spread of the virus. The department is collaborating with the state DOH on the implementation of Sara Alert.

The Health Department has information about contact tracing available in its FAQs on its COVID-19 website. <https://www.allegHENYcounty.us/Health-Department/Resources/COVID-19/Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx>