



10 DECEMBER 2020

**Public Health Alert – Holiday Gatherings**

Dear Chief and Health Director:

We are writing to you today to provide public health recommendations to take **immediate action** to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in your communities over the next several weeks as we wait for the rollout of vaccines. While we cannot eliminate all risks, there are things that can be done to reduce the risk of spread within communities.

Social Gatherings

As the holiday season is rapidly approaching, many people have questions about social gatherings and if they can take place safely. We know from the experience in First Nations communities in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta that gatherings have been a major source of transmission of COVID-19.

In order to avoid this risk, we are advising that people **not gather** in other people’s homes for holiday celebrations. Holiday **gatherings and celebrations should only include those living in an immediate household**, because every gathering can quickly contribute to the spread of the virus and overwhelm a community.

Continuing to Follow Public Health Recommendations

As you know, work is ongoing to plan for vaccine distribution in Ontario. However, we must take action now to prevent the spread of the virus and keep communities safe.

**Please advise your residents to continue to practice public health recommendations to prevent the spread of COVID-19:**

- DO NOT VISIT OTHER PEOPLE’S HOMES
- Holiday gatherings should only include members of an immediate household
- Wash hands often and practice good hygiene – you cannot do this too much
- Cover your cough or sneeze
- IF YOU HAVE ANY SYMPTOMS get tested immediately and stay away from others as much as possible
- Self-isolate until you have your test results and are notified by your provider about next steps
- Practice physical distancing of 2-metres and wear a mask when out of your home to get needed supplies of groceries, medications, etc.

This advice for holiday gatherings and celebrations is to supplement, not replace, the advice of local public health authorities. Together, this advice provides First Nations communities with the resources they need to plan a safer holiday celebration.



### Holiday Travel

Canadian citizens and permanent residents should avoid non-essential travel outside Canada until further notice to limit the spread of COVID-19. If any of your members must travel outside Canada during the holidays, advise them to check the latest [travel advice](#) before they leave to reduce their risk.

Advise your members to consider avoiding all non-essential trips within Canada, especially to areas that may have more COVID-19 transmission in communities. If they must travel during the holidays, they can visit [Canada.ca/travel](https://Canada.ca/travel) to check the latest travel advice before they leave and learn how they can lower their risk.

### Mental Health

Feelings of stress are common during the holiday season and may become amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This holiday season your community members may be experiencing:

- worry about finances and gift-giving;
- fear of getting sick with COVID-19 or of making others sick;
- family conflict resulting from differences in risk comfort level;
- sadness about breaking important family traditions or being away from loved ones.

Advise your members to take care of their mental health. Advise members to start coping with their emotions early and acknowledge any negative emotions. They need to know that it's okay to skip family gatherings to protect themselves, their families and their community.

The outdoors has been a refuge for many during the pandemic. Going outside for exercise promotes lower-risk socializing, and positive mental health and well-being. This can still be the case even in colder temperatures, as long as your members continue practicing physical distancing and other public health measures.

Let's put on our hats, mittens and masks, and **keep COVID-19 outside of our homes.**

If any of your members are in crisis, or need urgent medical support, call:

- 911 or the local emergency help line. They can also get support from a local crisis centre, the Canada Suicide Prevention Service (1-833-456-4566) and @KidsHelpPhone.
- The Hope for Wellness Help Line (1-855-242-3310) offers immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous Peoples, including an online Chat Counselling Service: <https://hopeforwellness.ca>

[Canada.ca/Coronavirus](https://Canada.ca/Coronavirus) has a wide range of immediate mental health and substance use resources and supports for Canadians, including the online [Wellness Together Canada portal](#).

Thank you for all of your efforts in protecting your communities,

Dr. Maurica Maher

Regional Public Health Physician, FNIHB ON Region