



**COVID-19 Guidance for Religious Services**  
**V2.0 08.07.2020**

<b>Version</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Updates</b>
1.2	27/02/2020	Areas affected link updated to HPSC list
1.4	04/03/2020	Added symptoms
1.5	05/03/2020	Amended to reflect cases notified in Ireland
2.0	06/07/2020	Updated to reflect government road map Updated IPC recommendations

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## Key points

Under the Irish Government COVID-19 “*Roadmap for reopening*” the reopening of places of worship is planned to commence with Phase 3. This guidance document should be read in conjunction with the [Government Roadmap](#) for the reopening of society.

This guidance document gives general advice about preventing the spread of COVID-19 during religious services. Some aspects of the guidance are specific to certain denominations but the guidance in general is intended to be relevant to all religious groups. If there are practices that are of concern to other religious groups on which advice is required these can be incorporated into future versions of this guidance.

## Information on COVID-19

COVID-19 is an illness, identified in late 2019, caused by a new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. The virus is spread mainly through tiny droplets scattered from the nose and mouth of a person with infection. The droplets can be scattered when the infected person coughs, sneezes, talks or laughs.

As COVID-19 is a new illness, we are still learning about how easily the virus spreads from person to person and how to control it, so it is important to keep up to date and make sure you are using the most the most up to date guidance [available](#).

We must take all possible action to prevent the spread of the disease in the community. It can take up to 14 days for symptoms of COVID-19 to show. Infection can spread from people before they get symptoms. Some people with infection have no symptoms or such mild symptoms that they take little notice but they can still spread infection.

## Symptoms

The [symptoms](#) of COVID-19 include:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty breathing
- Fever (high temperature)
- Loss of smell or taste

COVID-19 can also result in more severe illness including:

- Pneumonia
- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
- Kidney failure

Severe illness is more common in older people and in people who are medically vulnerable.

See: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/symptoms.html>

## General recommendations for all

COVID-19 virus can be picked up if you come into close contact with someone who is shedding droplets containing the virus, when they talk, laugh, cough or sneeze. You can also get infected if you touch - with your hands – a surface or object (for example a table top or a religious item) contaminated with virus, and then you touch your mouth, nose or eyes without having washed or sanitised your hands thoroughly. Surfaces and objects can be contaminated when droplets from an infected person fall onto them.

## Reducing the spread of infection – religious leaders and congregation

You should always practice good hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene to reduce the spread of disease, including COVID-19.

## Hand hygiene

[Wash your hands](#) regularly. Wash your hands with soap and water when hands are visibly dirty. If your hands are not visibly dirty, wash with soap and water or use an [alcohol-based hand rub](#).

You should wash your hands:

- after coughing or sneezing
- before and after you prepare food
- before eating
- after using the toilet
- when hands are dirty
- before and after caring for sick individuals
- after handling animal waste
- after using public transport
- when you get home

See HSE guidance at: <https://www.hse.ie/handhygiene>

## Respiratory hygiene & mask use

Cover your mouth and nose with a clean tissue when you cough or sneeze and then promptly dispose of the tissue in a bin and wash your hands. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into the bend of your elbow and not into your hands.

Posters on preventing spread of infection are available on the HPSC website.

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/posters/>

The National Public Health Emergency Team recommend that people wear cloth face coverings when in an indoor public space where a distance of 2m cannot be maintained.

See the Health Protection Surveillance Centre website for [posters](#) and guidance on the use of [face coverings](#) by the general public.

## Actions for those with symptoms

People who have been in contact with anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 should not attend religious services until they have received medical advice that it is safe to do so. If members of the

congregation, religious leaders (e.g. priests) or others involved in religious services feel ill and may have COVID-19, even if their symptoms are mild, they should stay at home and follow this advice:

If you **feel unwell with symptoms of possible COVID-19** you should:

- **Isolate yourself** i.e. stay separate from other people
- **Phone your GP without delay.** If you do not have a GP phone the Emergency Services on 999 or 112 and ask for the National Ambulance Service. Tell your GP/Emergency Services about your symptoms.

It is important that you **PHONE** your GP first and talk to them, rather than arriving at the GP surgery without contacting them, so that you do not put staff or other patients at risk of infection.

Information on when and how to [self-isolate](#) and to [restrict movement](#) is available on the HSE website: <https://www.2.hse.ie>

### **High risk groups and very high-risk groups (also called extremely vulnerable)**

COVID-19 can make anyone seriously ill but for some people the risk of serious illness is higher.

People should take care to follow the advice on how to protect themselves and others from infection.

Those considered to be at higher risk for COVID-19 include:

- People aged 60 years and older – even if they are fit and well
- People with long-term medical conditions – for example, heart disease, lung disease,
- Diabetes or liver disease or who have cancer or are obese.

Those considered to be extremely vulnerable and at very high risk for COVID-19 include:

- People who are over 70 years of age – even if they are fit and well
- People with organ transplants, severe respiratory conditions, undergoing active chemotherapy for cancer and those on certain immunosuppressant medications.

Further information on [high risk](#) and very high-risk groups and precautions to take can be found on the HSE website at: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/people-at-higher-risk.html>

## **Actions for churches and congregational settings where religious services take place**

COVID-19 is a new disease that appears to be easily spread between people and we need to exercise extreme caution to limit the spread of the virus. Reopening of a place of worship requires a plan for how this can be done safely. This guidance applies to congregational settings including churches, mosques, places of repose and crematoria and the measures are aimed at minimising risk of COVID-19.

- Current Government Guidelines must be adhered to.
- Religious leaders and members of the congregation should not attend at religious services if they are ill with symptoms of COVID-19 or other communicable infectious disease.
- An assessment should be carried out for each premises to determine how many people can attend within the requirements of social distancing. The number permitted to attend should be clearly displayed at each entrance.
- Public Health signage should be displayed at entrances to places of religious worship taking care not to cause obstruction or delay for those entering or leaving.
- Seating /standing places/places for mats should be arranged or marked off to maintain social distancing. Members of the same household can sit closer together but social distancing must be otherwise observed.
- Physical guides such as signs or markings on the floor should be used to ensure persons attending are aware of the distance required to ensure social distancing requirements are met.
- Where possible, separate points of entrance and exit should be considered to allow for one-way traffic.
- Staggering the entrance and exit of the venue should be considered to avoid loss of social distancing. Members of the congregation should be asked to ensure that they do not gather immediately outside the door and if they wish to have a conversation to maintain social distance and do so well clear of the door to facilitate others leaving the building. Stewards may need to be designated to assist with this measure.

- Have a plan for dealing with religious leaders or members of the congregation who become ill with symptoms of COVID-19 during a service, including isolating them from other people and seeking medical advice without delay (e.g. phone a GP/ Emergency Services). Have contact numbers for emergency services readily available.
- Appoint a COVID-19 coordinator if feasible.
- Explain clearly how the service will be conducted and what is expected of all members of the congregation in attending a service or in staying away from services if they are ill with symptoms of COVID-19 or other communicable infectious disease or have been in contact with a person with COVID-19 until medically advised that it is safe to attend.
- Suggest that those who are more vulnerable due to age or ill-health might participate via radio or web-cam.
- Communal items, such as religious books should be removed. Members of the congregation should be invited to bring their own religious reading material if required.
- For gatherings that use prayer mats or similar items, members of the congregation should be asked to bring their own prayer mats to avoid sharing of items.
- For religious gatherings that requires performance of ablutions before prayer people should be asked to perform ablutions at home rather than at the place of worship if this is possible.
- [Alcohol-based hand gel](#) should be supplied. These should be placed outside of the place of worship for use prior to entry and after exit and at appropriate points within the space where the religious service is held. Any spillage of alcohol-based hand gel should be cleaned up immediately to prevent falls.
- Tissues should be provided. People should be strongly encouraged to bring their own tissues to services. Provide bins for safe disposal of tissues.
- Ensure hand-washing facilities, including soap dispensers and disposable towels, are well maintained.



- Ensure all hard surfaces that are frequently touched, such as door handles, hand rails, taps and pews are cleaned regularly with a household detergent. Touching of surfaces should be minimized.
- In so far as possible (may vary with weather) keep entrance doors propped in an open position for arrival and departure to minimise the need for people to touch the door handles or have doors that can be pushed with shoulder.
- Ensure physical distancing is maintained during all services/gatherings, including by those leading or contributing to the performance of religious rites.
- Collection boxes should not be passed amongst members of the congregation.
- Members of a congregation should be advised that there is a risk of infection if they share a private vehicle with members of another household. If they do so they should maintain distance as much as possible, for example by sitting in the back passenger seat and should follow guidance for public transport in relation to use of cloth face coverings or masks.

### **Physical interaction during religious services**

Current information suggests that COVID-19 can spread easily between people and could be spread from an infected person even before they develop any symptoms. For this reason, physical interaction during religious services, including hand shaking or standing in direct contact, should be avoided. If, for any reason, contact is indispensable measures should be taken to inform participants of the risk and to mitigate risk by hand hygiene.

### **Choirs, music groups and other liturgical music**

Performance and practice by choirs and musical ensembles has been associated with spread of COVID-19. The importance of choirs and musical ensembles within the faith tradition should be considered carefully. If groups practice and perform it should be with very careful adherence to social distance and hand hygiene and an awareness of the potential risk in particular for vulnerable members.

## **Fonts for holy water**

Because COVID-19 appears to spread easily between people, holy water fonts should not be used. Members of the congregation should be reminded not to touch empty fonts. Posters should be displayed to alert people not to touch the fonts due to risk of spread of infection or the fonts should be covered with an appropriate cloth to prevent touching.

## **Touching or kissing objects/icons/symbols**

Because COVID-19 appears to spread easily between people, members of the congregation should be reminded not to touch or kiss objects/icons or symbols. Posters should be displayed to alert people not to touch or kiss these items due to risk of spread of infection or these items should be covered with an appropriate cloth to prevent touching.

Ritual objects used as part of a religious service should only be touched by one celebrant, while following strict adherence to hand hygiene. All objects should be regularly cleaned and disinfected, especially prior to and after use during the religious service.

## **Sharing items /equipment**

Because COVID-19 appears to spread easily between people, members of the congregation should be reminded not to share items such as beads, mats or materials used for ablutions or candle lighting.

Candle lighting by the public should be suspended and display stands removed or cordoned off.

Shared water sources for the purpose of rituals should be suspended (e.g. for ritual communal washing). Members of congregations should be instructed to use individual sources of water that are disposed of appropriately with regular disinfection of any objects or containers used to bring water to ritual locations.

## Sacrament of reconciliation

The use of confined spaces such as confessional boxes should be suspended and spaces closed off. Any alternative arrangement must be compliant with social distancing requirements.

## Holy Communion

- Members of the congregation should be told how the distribution of Communion is going to be managed and of the potential risk so that they can make an informed choice.
- Those who are distributing Communion should wear protective face coverings. They could in addition stand behind a screen that protects their face when distributing communion.
- Everyone distributing Communion should wash their hands or [use alcohol-based hand gel](#) both before and after distributing Communion. Priests should sanitise their hands after administering communion to themselves before distributing to communicants. Alcohol gel should be available close to where the priest or Minister is distributing Communion to facilitate re-sanitising of the hands if necessary during the distribution.
- Those receiving Communion should perform hand hygiene before receiving. Alcohol gel should be available at appropriate places to allow for use prior to or while approaching to receive Communion. Members of the congregation can be encouraged to bring their own hand gels.
- Physical distancing should be maintained while approaching and returning from receiving Communion.
- Alternatively, where more appropriate to a particular setting, Communion can be distributed to members of the congregation remaining in their seats and maintaining physical distance while priests or ministers make their way through the congregation.
- Communion should be distributed into the hands and NOT onto the tongue. The host should be placed in the hand of the recipient hand in such a way as to avoid hand contact. Priests and Ministers should be trained in technique of placing the host in the recipient's hand in a manner that avoids hand contact. Communicants should be told how the Communion host will be delivered.

- The elements of communion can be placed in individual disposable cups or containers and left separated on a tray or table for collection. Communicants could then approach and pick up an individual container for themselves while making sure not to touch any other hosts. The disposable cups or containers should be placed in a designated receptacle afterwards.
- Use of communal vessels should be suspended. For example, during Holy Communion in Christian religious services only one celebrant should drink from a Chalice. No one else should drink from that particular Chalice – this includes other priests, ministers of the Eucharist and members of the congregation.
- Concelebration should be suspended for this period.

## **Funeral services**

- Families and mourners organising and attending funerals should pay particular attention to the directions of funeral directors for the safe organisation and conduct of the funeral service in line with appropriate public health and government guidance.
- People should not shake hands to offer condolences at a funeral service.
- Queueing to pay respects should be avoided. Any paying of respects must be compliant with social distancing requirements.
- Signing of Books of Condolences should be suspended due to the risk of spread of infection.
- Carrying the coffin poses a particular concern because it requires 4 to 6 people to stand close to each other. If the bereaved consider that it is essential to carry the coffin the risk can be reduced if all the bearers are asymptomatic, and if hand hygiene is performed and if direct contact is avoided. The bearers should also wear a cloth face covering if possible.
- Guards of Honour must observe social distancing requirements.
- Those gathering at the graveside must observe social distancing. Consideration should be given to keeping graveside private to families and close friends.
- Funeral parlours and places of repose, including family homes, must adhere to controlled access and social distancing requirements.

## Arrangements for parochial activities/social religious gatherings

Parochial activities/social religious gatherings on church premises should follow Government general guidance on social gatherings and should use sensible practices and follow guidance on hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene and the wearing of face coverings. Posters/notices formally stating any guidance or changes in practice should be clearly displayed.

## Further information on COVID-19

Further information on COVID-19 is available from the following links:

- HSE-HPSC: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/>
- HSE: <https://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/>
- Irish Government Website: [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)
- Department of Health: <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/7e0924-latest-updates-on-covid-19-coronavirus/>
- Return to Work Safely Protocol: <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol>
- Symptoms of coronavirus: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/symptoms.html>
- Posters on prevention of spread of coronavirus: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/posters/>
- How to wash your hands: <https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/how-to-wash-your-hands.html>
- Hand Hygiene poster: <https://www.who.int/gpsc/tools/GPSC-HandRub-Wash.pdf>
- How to use alcohol hand rub poster: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/infectcont/sth/resources/alcoholhandrubposter.pdf>
- Use of face masks by the general public: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/ppe/useoffacemasksbythegeneralpublic/>
- Self-isolation at home: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/managing-coronavirus-at-home/self-isolation.html>

- Vulnerable groups at higher risk from COVID-19:  
<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/people-at-higher-risk.html>
- Guidance on cocooning to protect people over 70 years and those extremely medically vulnerable from COVID-19: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/vulnerablegroupsguidance/>