

PROTOCOL

Respiratory Outbreak Testing Prioritization

January 9, 2023

All confirmed and suspect outbreaks should be managed in consultation with your local Public Health Unit (PHU).

Background

- Ensuring appropriate turnaround time is a joint responsibility shared by the submitter, the health unit, the testing lab, and the provincial laboratory network.
- Diagnostic testing for health unit declared outbreaks will continue to be processed by Public Health Ontario's (PHO) Laboratory as a priority.
 - However, if required, PHUs may reroute samples to local laboratories for testing, to reduce the turnaround time during outbreaks.
- During the response to COVID-19, delays in processing outbreak specimens have been observed due to longer transportation times as well as challenges in differentiating outbreak specimens from non-outbreak specimens when they are received at the testing laboratory.
- In order to prioritize outbreak samples, the PHU must alert the lab ahead of sending specimens to them using the [PHO Outbreak notification process](#). Ensure that these samples are packaged and shipped in a separate courier bag with colour identification on both the exterior of the courier bag and accompanied by coloured requisitions, and shipped to the closest PHO (or other) lab immediately after collection.

Preparing and Processing COVID-19 and/or Respiratory Outbreak Specimens

To ensure shorter turnaround time of outbreak specimens, please follow the steps below.

1. **Before collection of specimens, the PHU:**
 - Declares an outbreak and assigns an outbreak number.

- Submits details on the outbreak to PHO Laboratory through the [Online Outbreak Notification Report](#). For more information on obtaining access and how to use the webpage, please visit [the webpage](#).
- Provides COVID-19 outbreak specimen management protocol (this document) and guidance to the long-term care home or facility impacted by the outbreak to ensure proper handling and management.

2. **During collection of specimens, the submitter will:**

- Print every requisition on green paper or another paper colour other than white. **Do not use white paper** for outbreak specimens. Using white paper will delay timely identification and specimen prioritization.
- Ensure requisition is properly completed (including the outbreak number clearly indicated on each requisition). Also, specimens must have a minimum of two patient identifiers – full name (first and last names) AND date of birth or health card number.
- Clearly identify the specimens by printing **Outbreak Specimens: OB# XXXX-YYYY-#####** on green paper or another paper colour other than white and inserting it into the transparent pocket of the transport bag (see template on page 3).
- Ensure appropriate packaging of specimens as per [Transport Canada’s COVID-19: Requirements for safe transportation of infectious substances \(Class 6.2\)](#)
- Expedite transport of outbreak specimens to the nearest PHO laboratory site via urgent courier or taxi (do not wait for a daily scheduled courier; contact provincial network if additional support is required). See [Transport Canada’s Temporary certificate TU 0764 – Test samples for COVID-19](#)

3. **Following submission:**

- In cases of delayed outbreak results, PHUs should contact the testing laboratory to follow-up on results. PHO’s Laboratory results are reported to the submitter and/or health unit. Please ensure submitter information is completely filled. Incomplete requisition may result in cancellation or delay in testing
- For specimens tested by PHO’s Laboratory contact CustomerServiceCentre@oahpp.ca or [416-235-6556](tel:416-235-6556) (toll-free: 1-877-604-4567).
- For further support contact [PHO Laboratory Customer Service Centre](#) and the [Provincial Network issues management team](#).

Transportation bag tag template

Print on green paper or another paper colour other than white. Fill-in Outbreak Number details and fold on dashed lines. Insert in clear pocket of transport bag.

Outbreak Specimens:

XXXX-YYYY-#####

OB# - -

Public Health Ontario

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