

COVID-19 will affect 2020 hunting season

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Safety is always on the mind of those out in the fields during hunting season. But this year there are a few new things to remember to stay safe and COVID-19 free.

While solo hunters are not heavily affected by COVID-19 regulations and recommendations, group hunters are being asked to minimize contact by both the Hastings Prince Edward Public Health and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

Here are some of Public Health's suggestions: Pack supplies to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as alcohol-based hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies and soap for frequent hand washing. Minimize the number of people in a vehicle when travelling to and from hunting sites and ideally share a vehicle only with your household members. Once at the hunt camp, keep two metres between yourself and others. Bring your own tent or trailer if possible. Limit indoor gatherings to 10 people or less and socialize outdoors whenever possible. Wear a mask when physical distancing is not possible. Avoid sharing items such as cigarettes, drinks, and cooking utensils. Clean frequently touched surfaces often and thoroughly. Avoid buffet style meals and encourage people to cook their own food. If cooking for others, wear a mask and wash your hands thoroughly while preparing and serving meals.

While gathering together is a large part of traditional hunting activities, we are asking all local hunters to take additional precautions this year to prevent the spread of COVID-19, says Dr. Piotr Oglaza, medical officer of health and CEO at HPEPH. To protect yourself and others, stay within provincial gathering limits, socialize outdoors, wash your hands often, avoid sharing food and drinks, and physically distance from those outside your household. While there have been no changes to the hunting regulations for 2020 regarding COVID-19 the MNRF does ask that hunters who plan to travel first check with the local public health unit to learn the area's physical distancing rules, social gathering limits, masking and other requirements. Jolanta Kowalski of the MNRF says that, Hunters are expected to comply with all hunting rules and regulations as well as public health guidelines and restrictions. Hunters are encouraged to ensure a plan is in place prior to heading out for their hunt, including how their party will be able to safely hunt together, which members will be present at the kill site [in addition to the tag holder], and how a party can safely stay at camp together while following provincial healthy and safety guidelines recommended by the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Currently Ontario's COVID-19 regulations state that 10 people are allowed to gather inside a building while 25 are allowed to gather outside as long as they are socially and physically distant. This may affect some hunting groups as they may need to find or create new camping or sleeping arrangements.

Hunters who plan to use a hunting guide or lodge service this year should ask what the providers are doing to implement COVID-19 regulations as part of their planning. Some locations may also be closed this year due to the stresses caused by COVID-19 and the resulting regulations and recommendations.

Conservation officers will still be seen out on patrol during the 2020 hunting season. Interactions with these officers will change according to different health unit regulations. Each officer, when interacting with the public, will explain to those they are talking with or inspecting how COVID-19 regulations have changed how they will interact with the public. For example: masks will be required, but some officers may prefer having an individual setting a licence card/paper down on a flat surface for inspection instead of it being handed to them as a way of limiting contact.

One large change is the closure of many weigh-in stations and hats for hides depots. The only depots that remain open for 2020 are in Northern Ontario that will be collecting moose hides. This means that any hunter wishing to donate the hide or head of their animal to science will have to contact their local MNRF office to talk with a biologist.

The Hastings Prince Edward Public Health Unit asks that hunters use Ontario's self-assessment tool before deciding to travel and do

not participate in any group travel, activities, or accommodations if they are feeling sick.

They also ask that a plan is in place in case a member of the hunting party becomes ill either at camp or symptoms show after the trip. When at camp the individual will need to self-isolate and return home immediately. If the individual develops severe symptoms, call 911. Otherwise, contact Telehealth Ontario for guidance at 1-866-797-0000. Keeping track of the names and contact information of those in the hunting party or at the hunting camp/lodge is also important, in case contact tracing is required.