



Preventing the Spread of COVID-19: What You Should Know About “Contact Tracing”

In light of COVID-19, many of the Wildland Fire Response Plans and other guidance documents refer to “contact tracing” as an action that should be implemented as part of our normal fire management practices this year. Ideas have ranged from resources maintaining contact logs to training personnel to perform contact tracing duties.

In June during the Sawtooth Fire in Arizona, an individual assigned to the incident had been in close contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case prior to working on the fire. This triggered the need to determine if contact tracing was needed.

The Medical Officer (a position the IC instituted for their IMT) on this incident reached out to local health authorities but they were unable to provide assistance. The Medical Officer consulted with a public health professional from their network for advice. After consultation on this potential exposure, this individual was demobilized and advised to follow their unit’s exposure guidance. The need for effective mitigations was reaffirmed and the IMT encouraged the continued practice of personal prevention measures such as social distancing and wearing face masks.

What is Contact Tracing?

As an important step to stop further disease transmission, contact tracing is the responsibility of public health authorities and helps contribute to their overall community prevention plans. Contact tracing also helps pinpoint the source of infection. It is often legally mandated and necessitates strict adherence to privacy requirements.

COVID-19 contact tracing is part of case investigation work done by trained individuals who identify, notify, and provide support to individuals who may have been infected through exposure to a probable or confirmed COVID-19 positive patient.

Contact tracers often provide social and medical support for patients and contacts. Testing is recommended for all close contacts of confirmed or probable COVID-19 patients. For individuals whose exposure is not captured above, it’s recommended to practice personal prevention strategies, such as social distancing, and monitor for symptoms.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines “close contact” as an individual who has been within six feet of an infected person for at least 15 minutes up to 48 hours prior to the onset of symptoms, or when a laboratory sample to test for COVID-19 was collected.

“Confirmed case” refers to a COVID-19 report with confirmatory laboratory evidence such as a positive viral test. “Probable case” refers to a person meeting clinical (certain symptoms) AND epidemiologic evidence (close contact) of COVID-19—but without confirmatory laboratory evidence.

What's the Role of Incident Management Personnel?

The working conditions and transient nature of wildland fire make it important to identify and notify anyone involved with the incident who may have been exposed (close contact) to a probable or confirmed COVID-19 case while on assignment.

IMTs and/or hosting units may consider developing an exposure reduction plan that in addition to prevention measures includes contact assessment for exposures and identifies basic actions to assist local public health professionals. The plan is not to replace contact tracing done by public health authorities but to reduce the spread of disease within an incident and assess immediate hazards to personnel until public health professionals can provide expert advice.

OSHA, EEOC, privacy and related concerns will need to be considered.

Exposure reduction plans should be shared with incident personnel so resources understand their contributions to its successful implementation.

Takeaways

- Available guidance documents are decision starting points but not decision makers.
- Seemingly small factors can greatly affect the complexity and magnitude; basic personal prevention measures are important for reducing disease spread.
- Document, isolate, determine exposure, and seek expert guidance. Don't be afraid to press pause.
- Be diligent on maintaining up-to-date contact information for resources; they may be needed for notifications outside the operational shift.
- Basic training regarding COVID-19, public health principles, and related terminology may assist in communicating and working with and in support of public health officials should a more complex exposure event occur.
- Engaging with public health officials early and inviting them to attend cooperator meetings may build relationships and increase effectiveness in the event of an exposure or confirmed case.
- Application of a COVID-19 related PACE (primary, alternate, contingency, emergency) model may be applicable due to fire activity, resource demand and/or local health authority's availability to provide guidance.
- The Medical Officer's urban Fire/EMS position and professional network enhanced their ability to understand and navigate recommendations and the public health system. Our municipal cooperators have been operationally entrenched in COVID-19 response and bring a different level of understanding that can enhance wildfire management.

Lingering Questions

- How should we treat a contact of a contact (a person who interacted with someone who has been in close contact with a confirmed COVID-19 individual)?
- And what type of exposures (duration, proximity, PPE use) should IMTs be concerned about?
- Whose definition of "exposure" should we be using as different guidance is being used among responding entities? For example, EMS personnel have been responding to potential COVID-19 patients for months but because of their use of N-95 respirators, gowns, and face shields, many EMS providers may not consider that interaction an exposure.
- Should fire activity and resource needs be considered when making and implementing COVID-19 related decisions?

Learn More

- What You Should Know About COVID-19 and the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and Other EEO Laws: <https://www.eeoc.gov/wysk/what-you-should-know-about-covid-19-and-ada-rehabilitation-act-and-other-eeo-laws>
 - Worker Safety and Support: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/worker-safety-support/index.html>
 - Contact Tracing: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/open-america/contact-tracing-resources.html>
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