

Isolation and Quarantine of Persons Potentially-Exposed to Ebola Frequently Asked Questions

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What is the purpose of isolation and quarantine?

The purpose of isolation and quarantine is to control the spread of contagious (infectious) illness. Public health officials use many different tools, two of which are isolation and quarantine. Both are common practices in public health, and both aim to prevent the exposure of well persons to infected or potentially infected person. Both may be undertaken voluntarily or compelled by authorities.

What is isolation?

Isolation is the separation of persons who are ill with specific contagious (infectious) illness from those who are healthy and the restriction of their movement to stop the spread of that disease. Isolation also allows for specialized medical care for people who are ill. People in isolation may be cared for in hospitals, in their homes, or in designated healthcare facilities. The length of isolation is the period of time during which the person is able to transmit the disease to others (period of communicability). Isolation is routinely used today by hospitals for patients with tuberculosis (TB) and other infectious diseases.

What is quarantine?

Quarantine refers to the separation and restriction of persons who, while not ill, have been exposed to an infectious agent and therefore may become infectious. Quarantine may be used when a person has been exposed to a highly dangerous and infectious disease. There needs to be consideration for what resources are available to care for quarantined people and what resources are available to implement and maintain the quarantine and deliver essential services, such as food.

Quarantine can include a range of disease control strategies that may be used individually or in combination, including: short-term, voluntary home confinement; restrictions on travel by those who may have been exposed; and restrictions on passage into and out of a geographic area.

Quarantine can also include other measures to control the spread of disease, such as: restrictions on the assembly of groups of people (e.g., school events); cancellation of public events (e.g., concerts); suspension of public gatherings and closing of public places (such as movie theaters); and closure of mass transit systems or broad restrictions on travel by air, rail, or water. But quarantine is much more likely to involve limited numbers of people in a limited geographic region than to be widespread.

Who orders isolation or quarantine for someone?

In New Hampshire, the Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has primary authority for ordering isolation and quarantine for persons within the State, though

the requests are usually made by an official in the Division of Public Health Services at DHHS because they investigate infectious disease outbreaks. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), also has the power to detain, medically examine, or conditionally release persons suspected of carrying certain communicable diseases within the United States.

What if someone does not want to be put into isolation or quarantine?

Procedures exist under New Hampshire law that allow health officials to compel someone to cooperate with an order of isolation or quarantine or to face legal actions if there is sufficient threat to the public's health and safety.

Whose job is it to enforce isolation and quarantine orders?

Law enforcement agencies enforce legal orders.

What should I do if my neighbor has been quarantined because of Ebola?

People who have had possible contact with the Ebola virus need to be monitored for symptoms of Ebola each day for 21 days after the last possible contact with Ebola virus. Some people, depending on the type of possible contact to Ebola virus, may also need to be quarantined to minimize the risk of spread of Ebola if they develop symptoms. Visiting your neighbor's home while they are quarantined, is discouraged. If your neighbor is outdoors in their yard, you may speak with them, but avoid physical contact and maintain a distance of at least 3 feet. Family members other than the person being quarantined are free to leave the home and can go to public places. It is safe for you to have physical contact with the family members or other close contacts of the quarantined person.

What if my neighbor requests me to pick up groceries or other items for them?

You may deliver the groceries or other items to them, but you should avoid physical contact with your neighbor and maintain a distance of at least 3 feet. You may even arrange a drop off location with your neighbor, such as the porch, to avoid all contact.

I know someone who traveled to West Africa and is now quarantined at home. The person is not staying at home and continues to go to stores and other public places. What should I do?

Some people being quarantined may be allowed to leave their home to participate in non-congregate activities (e.g. jogging, biking, etc.) as long as they stay at least three feet away from others. If you have concerns about the activities of someone who is quarantined, you can contact the NH Division of Public Health Services at 603-271-4496 (after hours 603-271-5300).

Do students or employees need to be excluded if someone in their home recently returned from Guinea, Liberia, or Sierra Leone and is quarantined?

No. Close contacts, such as family members, of quarantined individuals are free to leave the home and can go to public places like school and work. If the close contact/family member also traveled to Guinea, Liberia, or Sierra Leone a public health official will assess their exposures and institute the appropriate control measure, which many include quarantine.

For specific questions about isolation and quarantine, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health Services, Bureau of Infectious Disease Control at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496.