

Canada's COVID Alert App: Not Tracking You or COVID-19

On July 31, 2020, the federal government launched its long-awaited COVID Alert app (“**Covid Alert**” or the “**App**”). The App seeks to bolster contact tracing by letting people know if they have been in contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19. COVID Alert has been downloaded more than 4.9 million times since it was launched and more than 865 users across the country have reported a positive test through it.

How Does COVID Alert Work?

The App works in three steps. First, Bluetooth signals are used to exchange a code between a user's phone and nearby phones that also have the App installed. A code will be exchanged when a user spends at least 15 minutes less than 2 metres apart from another user. Then, when a person tests positive for COVID-19, they receive a one-time key from their local health authority that they can enter into the App. Finally, users who in the previous 14 days have exchanged a code with the infected person will receive a notification through the App that they may have been exposed to COVID-19.

The Government of Canada provides the following description outlining the usefulness of the App:

“The app is intended to complement existing measures to reduce the spread of the virus, including manual contact tracing. It serves to notify Canadians if they have been near someone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 and is also using the app, and encourage them to take appropriate next steps (e.g. getting tested)...

The public health benefits of this approach include encouraging testing for those who learn they have an elevated risk of exposure, and alerting app

users who receive messages of increased risk to adjust their behaviour to avoid putting others at risk, even if they are currently not experiencing symptoms.”¹

Unfounded Privacy Concerns

Some Canadians are concerned about installing an app administered by the federal government, based on fears that the App will collect user's information and allow their location to be tracked. Such fears are unfounded. The App does not collect or require any personal information to operate. You do not need to create an account nor is personal information needed to use the App.² The App also does not use or require any location tracking abilities or permissions.

To link nearby phones with one another (or exchange a “digital handshake”, as it's been described), random codes are shared between users' phones using Bluetooth. The Bluetooth communication between the phones is described as “short-range device-to-device communication”. The location of the digital handshake is not recorded or known by the App. The list phones in which a digital handshake has taken place is only stored on each individual user's phone. No information is being transmitted to a server.

When a person tests positive for COVID-19 and receives a key from a health authority to enter into the App, their identity is not revealed. The App will validate the key and the person will be prompted if they consent to uploading the random codes that have been exchanged with other users over the past 14 days.³ The App routinely pulls these codes and cross-references them with the codes

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stored on a user's phone. If the codes match, the user will be notified that they may have been exposed to COVID-19. The identity of users who receive a notification of a potential exposure is not revealed to anyone but the user themselves.⁴

The App aligns with the principles enumerated in the Joint Statement by Federal, Provincial and Territorial Privacy Commissioners regarding contact tracing and similar applications.⁵ These principles include minimal intrusiveness, purpose limitation and transparency.

Functionality and Privacy Trade-Offs

The App is not capable of telling a user the time or place that they may have been exposed to a person infected with COVID-19. Furthermore, the App does not provide information to provincial health authorities about where an infected user has been in the last 14 days or where clusters of positive cases are happening. The App also cannot notify users when or how frequently they fail to physically distance themselves from others. From a technological standpoint, an app could have been designed to do all these things. But as a way to minimize risks to privacy and enhance trust, the government implemented the App solely as an exposure notification app, rather than a contact tracing app with a multitude of features.

Looking Forward

The effectiveness of COVID Alert is dependent on a certain level of uptake. Its use is voluntary and so far has been downloaded by around 13% of Canadians. With that said, a joint study by Oxford and Google suggested that for comparable notification app with adoption rate of 15%, COVID-19 cases could be reduced by 8% and deaths by 6%.⁶

Alberta continues to its own app, ABTraceTogether, which has nearly 250,000 users. British Columbia and the territories have still not adapted COVID Alert. Individuals in these places can still download the App and use it to receive notifications of potential exposures. Notifications would come through users they've been in contact with who test positive in an adopting jurisdiction

and receive a key to enter into the App from their local health authority. Individuals in British Columbia and other places that have not adopted the App do not receive a key from their local health authority upon a positive test and therefore are unable report their diagnosis through the App.

There is no timeline for when COVID Alert will be adopted in British Columbia. Dr. Bonnie Henry, the Provincial Health Officer, recently said the province is working with the federal government "to make adjustments that will meet our needs...to supplement what we are doing in our contact tracing here". There has not been any indication from the province what these adjustments may be. Some federal officials have suggested B.C. would like the App to trace where outbreaks are happening and to provide notifications to users of areas with outbreaks. Given the design and capabilities of the App, and the focus of the federal government to quell privacy concerns, it is the writer's opinion that such adjustments will not be made in the near future.

Limiting the spread of COVID-19 will continue to be at the forefront of public health initiatives until a vaccine is available and widely disseminated. The effectiveness of COVID Alert as a tool for individuals and public health officials alike is still being determined.

¹ *COVID Alert: COVID-19 Exposure Notification Application Privacy Assessment* [www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/covid-alert/privacy-policy/assessment.html].

² Personal information may be required to download the App through the Apple App Store or Google Play.

³ App users also have the option of uploading their diagnosis key for the 14 days following receipt of a positive diagnosis, in the unfortunate scenario where an individual who has COVID-19 cannot self-quarantine), thereby allows other users for the next 14 days who they come into contact with to receive a notification of a potential exposure.

⁴ *Supra* note 1.

⁵ *Joint Statement by Federal, Provincial and Territorial Privacy Commissioners: Supporting public health, building public trust: Privacy principles for contact tracing and similar apps* [www.priv.gc.ca/en/opc-news/speeches/2020/s-d_20200507/#fn1].

⁶ Matthew Abueg et. al., *Modeling the combined effect of digital exposure notification and non-pharmaceutical interventions on the COVID-19 epidemic in Washington state* (2020) at 1.

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In his free time, Nicholas enjoys playing soccer, cycling, scuba diving, and travelling.

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