

The conflicting messages around mask wearing in particular — a three-layer mask is better, but don't throw away your two-layer mask either, the agency said this week — points to an overall failure of communication by the organization, some infection control experts say.

“I just think it's communication incompetence,” said Toronto infection control epidemiologist Colin Furness. “This three-layer mask they say may have a better benefit. How? Can they quantify it? Let's see the data. What did they do?”

Conservative health critic Michelle Rempel Garner echoed the sentiment, and said the agency is not being transparent with the public when it comes to some of its public health guidance.

“With this becoming a habitual pattern, I worry about Canadians losing trust in the agency, and therefore also I worry about compliance longer term,” she said.

“It's long overdue that PHAC start explaining to the Canadian public in a transparent way how they are making public policy decisions when it comes to advice regarding COVID.”

PHAC quietly updated its online guidance Tuesday regarding how COVID-19 can be transmitted, as first reported by the CBC. The new guidance includes the possibility that it can be transmitted through very small particles that linger in the air known as aerosols.

Prior to that, PHAC maintained that the only mode of transmission was large respiratory droplets, such as from coughing or sneezing, that can land on another person in close proximity or quickly fall onto surfaces. The agency has said a person touching a contaminated surface and then their eyes, nose or mouth can become infected.

Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam briefly mentioned aerosol transmission in a Tuesday media briefing, when she also announced a recommendation that Canadians should begin wearing three-layer masks, which would include a filter between two pieces of tightly woven fabric, ideally cotton.