

# Enhancing primary care supports for digestive healthcare

## Highlights:

- Patient quality of life and health outcomes are negatively affected by long wait times for specialist care.
- Many digestive health conditions can be addressed within primary care, allowing faster access to specialist care for urgent referrals.
- The Digestive Health SCN is working to spread primary care pathways across Alberta, to support quality digestive healthcare at the primary care level.

In 2014, primary care and gastroenterology (GI) leaders in the Calgary Zone decided to work together to address wait times for GI care. Thousands of patients with common, low-risk conditions such as constipation, dyspepsia, and irritable bowel syndrome were facing waits of more than 24 months for specialty care. To address this problem, they co-developed primary care pathways to support quality care for these patients by their primary healthcare providers within the [Patient's Medical Home](#). The pathways provide:

- evidence-based guidance for primary care providers on diagnosis and treatment
- patient handouts on these conditions and self-management strategies
- local resources
- references and more detailed background information

By implementing these pathways in the Calgary Zone, the routine waitlist was reduced from more than 2,700 patients in 2015 to zero in 2018. A research survey of family physicians in the Calgary Zone found that 55% were familiar with the pathways, and 78% of those stated that the pathways had changed their practice.

When the Digestive Health SCN was formed in late 2016, we heard that access to specialty GI care was a key concern throughout Alberta. In consultation with stakeholders, we began to work towards spreading the GI primary care pathways across the province. So far, we have:

- Engaged a multi-disciplinary working group with representation from all Zones.
- Gathered feedback on the pathways, and proposed revisions to ensure the content and format are relevant for all areas of the province.
- Connected with GI and primary care providers in the Edmonton and Central Zones, to obtain initial agreement to spread the pathways into these Zones.
- Started to develop an implementation plan, which will include provincial components (e.g. a website to provide easy access to the pathways and a common approach to evaluation) and local components (e.g. customized implementation plans and knowledge translation activities).

To learn more about this initiative, get involved in local planning in your Zone, or provide your suggestions on implementation of the pathways, please email [DigestiveHealth.SCN@ahs.ca](mailto:DigestiveHealth.SCN@ahs.ca).