

**Date:** Monday, March 2, 2020  
**To:** Public Health Directors, Managers and Frontline Nursing Staff  
**From:** Medical Officers of Health, Alberta Health Services  
**Subject:** Update to COVID-19 Specimen Collection Processes

---

The COVID-19 screening criteria for testing symptomatic individuals in Alberta are being updated to reflect the current global epidemiology in alignment with guidance from the Public Health Agency of Canada.

**NEW:** Travellers returning from Iran are at increased risk for COVID-19 infection. Travellers to Iran may not be aware that they have been in close contact with someone who is sick.

**Effective immediately, all travellers returning or who have returned from Iran in the last 14 days, are recommended to:**

- **Self-isolate and limit contact with others for 14 days since last in Iran**
- **Self-monitor for symptoms like fever, cough or shortness of breath**
- **Call Health Link 811 at the first sign of symptoms**
- **Note: these are the same recommendations as for travellers to Hubei province**

**Screening criteria for testing as of February 26, 2020:**

**People with fever and/or a cough or shortness of breath should be considered for testing for COVID-19 if they meet any of the following criteria.**

**In the 14 days before illness onset, they:**

- **Travelled to mainland China, Hong Kong, Italy, Iran, Singapore, Japan, or South Korea; OR**
- **Had close contact\* with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19; OR**
- **Had close contact\* with a person with acute respiratory illness who travelled to the above listed countries within 14 days before their illness onset; OR**
- **Had laboratory exposure to biological material (e.g. primary clinical specimens, virus culture isolates) known to contain COVID-19 virus.**

\* **Close contact** includes providing care for the individual (including healthcare workers, family members or other caregivers) without consistent and appropriate use of personal protective equipment OR living with or having close prolonged contact (within 2 metres) with the person while they were infectious OR having direct contact with infectious bodily fluids of the person (e.g. was coughed or sneezed on) while not wearing recommended personal protective equipment.

**In addition:** Symptomatic individuals outside of these criteria may also be considered for testing if in the clinician's opinion there is a reason to suspect COVID-19 (e.g. history of travel to other countries not listed above where cases of COVID-19 have been occurring, hospitalized patients without travel history that have severe respiratory illness without another known etiology).

In order to support this change in testing criteria and the potential increase in the number of individuals who may require testing, several testing pathways have been established including through community clinicians, emergency departments, urgent care centres and home collection through the Community Paramedic and Zone Public Health programs. At this point, the overarching goal of the public health response is to make every effort to minimize community transmission of COVID-19. Testing in the home environment is the preferred strategy, when possible, as it limits the potential for community exposures and minimizes the demand on treatment services. Preparations are underway in all zones to modify testing pathways, as needed, based on demand.

To access home collection through the Community Paramedic and Zone Public Health programs, a pathway was developed in collaboration with Health Link.

### **Health Link and Public Health Referral Process:**

- Clients call into Health Link and are assessed for symptoms and potential exposure to COVID-19 as per the current travel/exposure criteria.
- Health Link will triage individuals and decide if they are an appropriate candidate for home specimen collection.
- If clients are appropriate for home specimen collection (i.e.; not requiring urgent medical attention for symptoms), Health Link will proceed to initiate a referral to either the Community Paramedic program OR Zone Public Health.
- The Community Paramedic program will be the first call for referrals.
- If the Community Paramedic program reaches capacity and is unable to collect further specimens on a given day within a given Zone, Health Link will be advised and will then proceed to initiate a referral to Zone Public Health as follows:
  - Health Link will fax the attached referral form to Zone Public Health at the numbers indicated in the table below.
  - Zone Public Health will complete a laboratory requisition and proceed to arrange for home collection with the client within 24 hours of receiving the referral.
  - Laboratory requisition fields must be completed with the following information:
    - **Patient:** ALL client demographics including DOB and PHN
    - **Requestor** information. Each Zone will order using their Zone MOH information in the table below.
      - Use the phone number under the Public Health column for the requestor phone number.
    - **Specimen type/source:**
      - **Type** = Nasopharyngeal
      - **Source** = Nasopharyngeal
    - **Clinical history/reason for testing:** Relevant exposure history from the Health Link referral must be included on **all requisition forms** including COVID-19 exposure history and dates of travel/exposure. If any of this information is missing, Public Health Nurse should gather missing information from the client directly and populate onto the requisition.
      - **Reason for Testing = Investigation for COVID-19 exposure**
    - **Symptom history:** Check all that apply and include onset date of symptoms.
    - **Molecular detection** = Respiratory Pathogen Panel
    - **Specify other serology and Molecular tests:** COVID-19 testing
  - Specimen must be collected using appropriate type of swab and medium and packaged and transported using appropriate Transportation of Dangerous Goods-B (TDG-B) requirements. Follow Zone Public Health processes for same.

- Specimens must be collected using droplet and contact precautions which includes: gown, gloves, protective eye wear/face shield (personal eye glasses are not sufficient) and a surgical/procedure mask. An N95 mask is NOT required for NP specimen collection. See AHS IPC resource link below for comprehensive information related to appropriate IPC measures.
- Public Health Nurses should reinforce that clients must self-isolate at home until they receive a call from a communicable disease nurse with their test results. Instructions for how to safely seek care if symptoms become worse is detailed in the Alberta Health Services (AHS) resource: PUI Letter, Caring for Yourself At Home. Test results may take from 24 hours to 3-4 days to come in, depending on the Zone due to time needed to transport specimens from point of collection to either ProvLab Edmonton or ProvLab Calgary.
  - Patients should be provided with the AHS information sheet for people who are under investigation for COVID-19: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-pui-letter.pdf>
  - Self-isolation guidelines: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/self-isolation-information-sheet>
  - Clients can also be referred to the AHS external website for general information about COVID-19: [ahs.ca/covid](https://ahs.ca/covid)
- For client specific concerns that would require Zone MOH/CDC consultation (e.g., specimen unable to be collected, arrived at home and found out there were 2 other symptomatic people, etc.), follow regular Zone processes for contacting Zone CDC nursing/Zone MOH during business hours and after hours/weekends. For questions related to testing process, supplies or transport see resource links below.

ZONE	COMMUNITY PARAMEDIC	ZONE PUBLIC HEALTH	ORDERING CLINICIAN
EDMONTON	Ph. 1-833-367-2788 Fax 780-735-0421	Ph. 780-497-2925 Fax 780-475-8176	Dr. Christopher Sikora Healthcare Provider ID: 52314 Facility/Location Code: 1902-Coronation Plaza Edmonton
CALGARY	Ph. 1-855-491-5868 Fax 403-776-3835	Ph. 403-863-5016 Fax 403-531-8054	Dr. Jia Hu Healthcare Provider ID: 019046Q Facility/Location Code: SMC Communicable Disease Unit, 1213 4 St SW Calgary
CENTRAL (Red Deer and North)	Ph. 1-833-367-2788 Fax 780-735-0421	Ph. 403-356-6394 Fax 403-356-2054	Dr. Digby Horne Healthcare Provider ID: 157554 Facility/Location Code: 2926 – 300 Jordan Parkway, Red Deer
CENTRAL South of Red Deer)	Ph. 1-855-491-5868 Fax 403-776-3835		
NORTH	N/A	Ph. 1-800-732-8981 Fax 780-538-7665	Dr. Albert de Villiers Healthcare Provider ID:63469 Submitter Code: 2955- 2101, 10320 - 99 St Grande Prairie
SOUTH	Ph. 1-855-491-5868 Fax 403-776-3835	Ph. 587-220-5753 Fax 403-592-4144	Dr. Vivien Suttorp Healthcare Provider ID/PRACID: 720395108 Facility/Location Code: 011916C

## Resource Links:

- **Appendix A:** COVID-19 Referral for Testing
- For Infection Control resources and recommendations refer to the AHS website: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page16947.aspx>
- For questions about specimen kits, testing, requisitions and TDG information refer to the current APL lab bulletin: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/lab/Page3290.aspx>
- Self-isolation guidelines: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/self-isolation-information-sheet>

## APPENDIX A

### COVID-19 Referral for Testing

Referral for testing of individuals who meet the screening criteria for COVID-19:

#### COVID-19 exposure history

Travel from which country:

Dates they were there:

Travel date home:

#### Direct exposure to person with COVID-19 (yes/no/unsure):

If yes, what was exposure (as a caregiver, living with someone, or contact with infectious bodily fluids)?

Date exposure occurred:

#### Symptoms (y/n):

Date symptoms started:

#### Has a diagnostic swab already been done (y/n)?

If yes: What was the date of the swab?

What was the result of the swab?

Caller is aware referral for testing is being sent and has been advised to self-isolate at home until they receive a phone call from public health with the results of their testing.