AHS Update: Expanded public health measures aim to reverse rising numbers of new cases and hospitalizations

Please print and share with your teams as needed

Dear staff, physicians and volunteers,

Today’s Update

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- COVID-19 Testing for Healthcare Workers — The Latest Numbers
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COVID-19 Status

The Government of Alberta announced Tuesday expanded public health measures (see item below) designed to reverse rising numbers of new cases, hospitalizations and ICU admissions — a trend that continued this past week.
Between Dec. 3 and Dec. 9, Alberta recorded more than 1,500 cases each day, with 1,881 reported on Dec. 4, an all-time high. Over this period, there was an average of 1,733 daily new cases, compared to 1,591 the previous week, a nine per cent increase. If there’s a sliver of positive news, it’s the fact this single-digit increase is preferable to what we’ve seen over the previous four weeks, when we saw week-to-week increases of between 23 percent and 42 per cent.

For the week ending Dec. 9, there were 6,573 cases among individuals aged 20 to 49 years, which is 54 per cent of all new cases. However, cases continue to occur in every age group. This week, 1,833 new cases were reported among school-aged children (5 to 19 years) and 1,891 new cases were reported among older adults (60 years and older).

Alberta surpassed 20,000 active cases for the first time on Dec. 6 and had a record number of active cases on Dec. 7 with 20,388 active cases.
As of Dec. 9, there are 20,163 active cases in the province. Edmonton Zone has the most active cases with 9,464, a 14 per cent increase compared to the previous week. North Zone reported a 26 per cent increase compared to the previous week, the largest proportional increase among the five zones. For the second consecutive week, the South Zone reported a 5 per cent decrease in the number of active cases compared to the previous week. The table below shows the number of active cases in each zone for the last two weeks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Active Cases (week ending Dec. 9)</th>
<th>Active Cases (week ending Dec. 2)</th>
<th>Per Cent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>9,464</td>
<td>8,331</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>7,304</td>
<td>6,445</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>1,480</td>
<td>1,251</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>1,247</td>
<td>991</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>-27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hospitalizations and ICU admissions**

As of Dec. 9, there are 682 individuals in Alberta hospitals, with 124 in ICUs. These numbers represent a 34 per cent increase in total hospitalizations from the previous week. The breakdown of hospitalizations by zone as of Dec. 9 is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Hospitalizations</th>
<th>Patients in ICU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other notable COVID-19-related information:

- As of Dec. 9, a total of 75,054 cases of COVID-19 have occurred in Alberta and 2,465 individuals have been hospitalized, which represents 3.3 individuals for every 100 cases. In all, 54,225 Albertans have recovered from COVID-19.
- Alberta has reported 666 deaths since the start of the pandemic, with 14 per cent of those deaths occurring in this last week alone. We extend our condolences to the families of these individuals, and to all who have lost loved ones from any cause during this time.
- In the past week, 134,902 COVID-19 tests were completed, an average of 19,272 per day. A record 23,463 tests were performed on Dec. 5. The daily positivity rate reached a record of 10.74 per cent on Dec 3. A total of 2,444,373 tests have been conducted as of Dec 9.
- As of Dec 10, AHS has confirmed 3,119 individuals with COVID-19 were present at schools while infectious or acquired the disease in the school
setting. Currently, 897 out of 2,415 schools in the province (37.1 per cent) have reported an individual has attended their school while infectious or had in-school transmission.

Things You Need to Know

COVID-19 Testing for Healthcare Workers — The Latest Numbers
We continue to update the testing data for healthcare workers in the AHS Healthcare Worker COVID-19 Testing dashboard. These statistics provide the total number of AHS, Covenant Health and Alberta Precision Laboratories (APL) employees and physicians tested, including a breakdown of the number of positive tests and those who have been confirmed to have been exposed in the workplace.

As of Dec. 9:
- 69,315 employees (AHS, APL, and Covenant combined) have been tested for COVID-19 and, of those tested, 2,546 (or 3.67 per cent) have tested positive.
- Of the 921 employees who have tested positive and whose source of infection has been determined, 302 (or 32.8 per cent) acquired their infection through a workplace exposure. An additional 1,625 employees who have tested positive are still under investigation as to the source of infection.
- 4,454 physicians (AHS, APL, and Covenant combined) have been tested for COVID-19 and, of those tested, 118 (or 2.65 per cent) have tested positive.
- Of the 44 physicians who have tested positive and whose source of infection has been determined, seven (or 15.9 per cent) acquired their infection through a workplace exposure. An additional 74 physicians who have tested positive are still under investigation as to the source of infection.

For more information, see the AHS Healthcare Worker COVID-19 Testing infographic and dashboard.

Expanded, Mandatory Provincewide Public Health Measures Announced
As mentioned earlier, the Government of Alberta announced Tuesday expanded, provincewide public health measures. All Albertans, businesses, organizations and service providers must follow all new health measures. These restrictions will be in place for a minimum of four weeks.

We encourage you to familiarize yourself with these measures:

Social gatherings – immediate
- All indoor and outdoor social gatherings – public and private – are prohibited.
- Close contacts are limited to household members only.
Individuals who live alone will be allowed up to two close contacts for in-person visiting, with those two people remaining the same for the duration of the restriction period.

- Festivals, parades, events, concerts, exhibitions, competitions, sport and performance remain prohibited.

**Masking – immediate**

- The mandatory indoor public masking requirement has been extended provincewide.
  - Public spaces include locations where a business or entity operates and is applicable to employees, visitors and the general public.
  - Applies to all indoor workplaces and facilities outside the home.
  - Farm operations are excluded.
  - Rental accommodations used solely for the purposes of a private residence are excluded.

**Places of worship – starting at 12:01 a.m., Dec. 13**

- All places of worship will be limited to 15 per cent of fire code occupancy for in-person attendance.
  - Virtual or online services are strongly encouraged.
  - Drive-in services where individuals do not leave their vehicles and adhere to guidance will be permissible and are not subject to capacity restrictions.
  - Mandatory mask mandate, physical distancing and other guidelines remain in place.

**Retail – starting at 12:01 a.m., Dec. 13**

- Retail services must reduce customer capacity to 15 per cent of fire code occupancy, with a maximum of five customers permitted.
  - Curbside pickup, delivery and online services are encouraged.
  - Shopping malls will be limited to 15 per cent of fire code occupancy.

**Closures – starting at 12:01 a.m., Dec. 13**

- Restaurants, pubs, bars, lounges and cafes will be closed to in-person service.
  - Only takeout, curbside pickup and delivery services are permitted.
- Casinos, bingo halls, gaming entertainment centres, racing entertainment centres, horse tracks, raceways, bowling alleys, pool halls, legions and private clubs will be closed.
- Recreational facilities – fitness centres, recreation centres, pools, spas, gyms, studios, day and overnight camps, indoor rinks and arenas – will be closed.
- Outdoor recreation is permitted, but facilities with indoor spaces except for washrooms will be closed.
• Entertainment businesses and entities – libraries, science centres, interpretive centres, museums, galleries, amusement parks and water parks – will be closed.
• Hotels may remain open but must follow restrictions – no spas, pools, gyms or in-person dining. Room services only.
• Personal and wellness services, including hair salons, nail salons, massage, tattoos, and piercing, will be closed.
• Health services, including physiotherapy or acupuncture, social or protective services, shelters for vulnerable persons, emergency services, child care, and not-for-profit community kitchens or charitable kitchens will remain open for in-person attendance.

Work from home – starting at 12:01 a.m., Dec. 13
• Mandatory work from home measures will be implemented unless the employer determines that work requires a physical presence for operational effectiveness.
• AHS continues to ask those who are able to work from home where it’s operationally feasible to do so until further notice. As we continue to combat the spread of COVID-19, we all need to do our part and keep each other safe. The COVID-19 Relaunch Playbook has resources to support staff who are working remotely.
• AHS leaders are responsible for determining if a physical presence is required at an AHS worksite and for exploring avenues to facilitate remote work. Please reach out to your leader if you have questions or to confirm decisions about remote work.

Closures
• Entertainment businesses and entities – community halls and centres, indoor children's play centres and indoor playgrounds, theatres, auditoriums, concert halls, and community theatres, nightclubs, banquet halls and conference centres, indoor and outdoor festivals, concerts with the exception of drive-in events, tradeshows, and sporting events or competitions, remain closed.

First Doses of Vaccine Arrive Next Week
Health Canada approved the first COVID-19 vaccine on Wednesday. AHS and the Government of Alberta are planning for the arrival of 3,900 doses of Pfizer vaccine in Alberta next week, and bringing this vaccine to AHS employees will play a critical role in protecting front-line staff from the virus.

AHS is working closely with Alberta Health to ensure healthcare workers are included in this phase. Eligibility is determined by the Government of Alberta and will begin with workers at the highest-risk facilities. The first vaccinations will be provided to a relatively small number of healthcare workers who are crucial to supporting the most vulnerable Albertans. This group includes respiratory therapists, ICU staff and physicians, and some eligible long-term care healthcare workers.
Staff and physicians included in the preliminary phase will be contacted directly and will travel to designated vaccination sites, as Pfizer requires the initial vaccine supply not be delivered from the location where it is stored.

Additional information on the preliminary vaccine rollout is in development and will be shared as soon as possible. A website has been developed and an FAQ is now available. Please watch for additional information.

After almost a year of living during a pandemic, the arrival of COVID-19 vaccine brings optimism and hope to our fight against the virus. As we move forward, please continue to follow current restrictions. Remember that it will be many months before the majority of Albertans are immunized. In the meantime, we remain each others best defense.

**Protect Yourself and Others. Be Fit for Work.**
Staff who are reporting to a non-continuing care facility with a unit, area or site on outbreak will need to complete the outbreak fit for work screening questionnaire that includes the secondary symptom list.

The Online Fit for Work Screening Tool can be found here: ahs.ca/fitforwork. Information related to screening for people visiting residents and patients is available at ahs.ca/visitation. Options for fit for work screening are available through our COVID-19 Daily Fit for Work Screening Protocol.

We have a shared responsibility in creating and maintaining a safe and healthy workplace so we can provide quality and safe patient care. Our actions have a direct impact on our colleagues and patients. We must be diligent in modelling safe practices that reduce the spread of COVID-19. This includes continuous masking, physically distancing and staying home when you are sick. If you are unsure if your symptoms should require you to stay home, talk to your leader.

Please remember to continue to check for the latest updates on COVID-19 Daily Fit for Work Screening by visiting ahs.ca/fitforwork.

**Updated Guidance for Designated Family/Supports**
Due to the rising COVID-19 numbers, rates of community transmission and feedback received, AHS has made the difficult decision to limit onsite designated support in all acute care facilities including ambulatory care, urgent care/emergency department and maternity settings.

Effective Monday, Dec. 14, access for designated support persons and visitors in AHS acute care facilities includes the following:

- One designated support person for each patient in ambulatory, emergency, urgent care, maternity/postpartum and other inpatient areas.
- Up to two designated support persons for each patient in critical care, pediatrics and NICU.
• For exceptions from the above in pediatrics and maternity, for dependent-adults, and for supporting patients at end-of-life, please go to ahs.ca/visitation.
• There are also federal and provincial compassionate exemptions and Chief Medical Officer of Health exemptions for end-of-life and critical illness when in quarantine and isolation.

The updated guidance includes specific responsibilities for designated support persons and clinical services to follow. The above restrictions will be maintained during the holiday season. Please review our patient and family holiday season FAQ for information on support over the holidays.

These changes are to increase the safety of everyone at our sites and for easier implementation and a more consistent application of the guidance across the province. Also, this will help us to balance the need for patients to get the support from their loved ones over the holidays and into the new year, while we continue to deal with the challenges posed by the spread of COVID-19 in our communities.

24/7 On-Call Assistance Available for Ethical Concerns
Since April, AHS has regularly updated family support and visitation guidelines, adjusting them to reflect current evidence and COVID-19 transmission in Alberta. Decisions to limit the interactions between patients, residents, families and visitors, to ensure their safety and the safety of those providing care, have not been taken lightly. We understand it has been difficult for all involved.

To help our staff during this time, the AHS 24/7 rapid response ethics consultation service is available to respond to questions and issues relating to family presence and visitation guidelines, as well as to other COVID-19-related questions. Call 403-689-3548.

For other clinical ethics inquiries, please email clinicalethics@ahs.ca or call 1-855-943-2821. The AHS Clinical Ethics Service is available for any care provider seeking support and assistance in resolving difficult or ethically challenging situations.

Verna’s Weekly Video Message — Scientific Advisory Group
Using the best possible evidence to make informed decisions is key to our pandemic response. And with the ever-changing nature of this pandemic, we often need that information quickly.

That’s where the Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) comes in.

SAG connects with clinicians, operations, researchers and other experts to review, synthesize and interpret emerging evidence and guidance from national and international bodies, regarding various facets of COVID-19.

The focus of these reviews is to proactively support staff and patients during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to support best practices in healthcare settings across
Alberta. Topics range from exploring viral transmission in condominiums and apartments, to determining the best strategies for controlling COVID-19 outbreaks.

Joining me (Verna) to tell us more about the SAG are its two co-chairs:

- Dr. Braden Manns, Associate Chief Medical Officer.
- Dr. Lynora Saxinger, Physician and Medical Lead, AHS Antimicrobial Stewardship, North.

Braden and Lynora discuss the work of SAG, how they support our pandemic response, and what the future might have in store for this group.

Straight Talk From You — ‘Help Me Do My Job by Staying Home’
Straight Talk is a video series in which healthcare workers talk from the heart about what they’re seeing and experiencing at work and in their communities as COVID-19 spreads across the province. AHS is posting a new Straight Talk video every day on YouTube and sharing it through our AHS accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Please feel free to share these with your networks and on your social platforms as you see appropriate.

Here is another Straight Talk video, featuring Sijie Xia, a respiratory therapist at the University of Alberta Hospital.

“I understand COVID fatigue is a real thing,” says Sijie. “But at the same time, you need to help us in the hospitals, especially when we see such high hospitalizations - and hospitalizations that end up in ICU.... Curb the spread with proper hand hygiene, with mask wearing, social distancing. Help me do my job by staying home.”
You can see all of the Straight Talk videos, and new ones daily, on the AHS website.

**Cancer Public Awareness Campaign**
As Alberta moves through the second wave of the pandemic, undiagnosed cancer rates are going up. This trend is not unique to Alberta and has been identified across Canada and in other parts of the world.

To improve diagnosis rates, AHS is asking all staff, primary care physicians and partners to:

- Educate Albertans about listening to their bodies and seeking medical attention if something seems or feels off.
- Reassure Albertans that healthcare facilities and primary care clinics remain safe places to seek care, and follow stringent COVID-19 cleaning and safety protocols.
- Reiterate their family physicians and nurse practitioners want to hear from them and help investigate their concerns.
- Remind Albertans that having an ongoing relationship with a family doctor or nurse practitioner can help keep them well – during the pandemic and beyond.

Let us remind Albertans about the importance of listening to their bodies and to seek medical attention if they notice any changes.

**Photo of the Week**
Every week, we highlight a photo that illustrates your efforts, compassion and achievements as we respond to the pandemic and support Albertans who come to us for care.
This week, we share with you a photo of music therapist Sarah Van Peteghen, who plays a song for a young patient.

To see all our AHS photos, visit our Instagram Gallery on the AHS website.

**Influenza Immunization Update**
More than 1.3 million doses of influenza vaccine have been administered in Alberta, which is close to 30,000 more vaccines administered than around this same time last year.

For the seventh week in row, there are no reported cases of seasonal influenza in Alberta. The weekly influenza data report is available at ahs.ca/influenza.

For staff, check Insite for options to get the flu shot, resources to support this year’s campaign and guidance on what to do if you experience influenza-like symptoms after immunization.

More on clinics for the public, including your families, is available on the AHS website. And if you got your flu shot at a public health clinic, pharmacy or doctor’s office, please complete the Got My Flu Shot Form.

**Connect Care – Change in Timing**
Given the current situation across AHS related to managing COVID-19 and the pressure this has placed on the health system, AHS’ Executive Leadership Team has made the decision to change the timing and scope of upcoming Connect Care launches.

Wave 3 of Connect Care will launch in two parts: the portion planned for North Zone will launch April 10, while the Calgary Zone portion of Wave 3 will be further reviewed in consultation with zone leaders and teams. We are currently assessing
the situation in order to determine our new wave rollout plan and sequencing for other waves. Our commitment is to keep the full implementation within the originally planned timeframe. Dates for future launches will be discussed and communicated once we know more.

Connect Care remains one of our highest organizational priorities. Even with this change, some Connect Care work will still continue to support the needs of the organization and prepare for the next launches.

We are thankful for all the work done to successfully launch Wave 2 in late October and we want to recognize the preparations undertaken for our next launches by teams across the organization. Your work is very valuable and will support our next waves when we are ready. In the meantime, our immediate priority is to support Alberta’s COVID-19 response.

Be Well - Be Kind

Celebrate The Season, Just Differently
The holiday season is a time to celebrate but this year will be different. We can still stay socially connected, even if we stay physically distant. Connecting with your co-workers is important for team building and our mental health and well-being. This year we need to ensure we celebrate each other and the holidays safely.

It is very important that all employees follow the latest public health measures from the Government of Alberta while ensuring quality interactions with colleagues, friends, family and other loved ones. Your actions make a difference and can impact those around you. It’s critical that we all do our part to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and stay safe.

In addition to not attending gatherings, staff are reminded to remain vigilant and implement safety measures during breaks. As we continue to see cases rise, there is an extremely high risk for transmission of COVID-19 in small, enclosed spaces, such as break rooms, and other common areas, if appropriate control measures are not followed. This includes completing the Fit for Work questionnaire online before coming into work as well as staying home when sick, physically distancing from others, continuous mask-wearing and eye protection, and practising good hand hygiene.

Although we are not able to accept donated food or to celebrate with potlucks or shared food this year, we encourage you to come up with creative ways to connect safely. You can consider making your celebration virtual, take breaks in different locations, or stagger eating times to ensure all protocols are being followed. Here are a few more safe ideas to consider for this year’s celebrations. For other considerations, check out the seasonal celebrations information sheet.

We’re all in this together and we’ll need each other to get through this together.
Sharing the Love — Kudos for Surgery Nurses in Fort Mac

I just want to say what a fantastic job the surgery nurses are doing with the COVID-19 unit at the Northern Lights Regional Health Centre in Fort McMurray. They have organized the PPE and supplies in a way that is both safe and efficient. They have adopted best practices in donning and doffing that helps to keep us all safe. They make sure we do it right, and they do it all with such good humour and a positive attitude. They continue to give the best patient care in a caring way in the midst of a pandemic with all the inherent risks to themselves. I just want to say to my brave, courageous, professional and compassionate colleagues ... THANK YOU!

— Dr. Liam Griffin
Hospitalist, Northern Lights Regional Health Centre

Gratitude from Albertans

Everything you and your colleagues do every day to provide safe quality care to all Albertans is being noticed. Messages of gratitude keep pouring in from across the province and beyond during the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to share a few recent messages of thanks with you — and you can see others on our Sharing the Love webpage.

Ginger (our Elf on the Shelf) asked our daughter to write a message to a community hero. Lauren chose to create a message to all the healthcare workers and I thought it should be shared far and wide. Thank you to all AHS staff working at the COVID-19 front lines and those supporting.

— Stephanie

All the nurses were very professional and yet (showed) personal compassion. In the midst of this pandemic and their own concerns, they really put the care of others first. A big thank you to you all.
Thank you for always being there ready to help. Thank you for being strong and resilient. Thank you for your compassion when all seems lost. You all remain professional in times when all seems hopeless. You are amazing, strong and appreciated. You give so much of yourself to the job, it is amazing to see the depths of your compassion. Stay safe.

— Craig Fisher

Thank you so much for taking care of Calgarians. I understand that this is a hard time to work and you probably have a million things on your mind. I just wanted to say thank you for all of your hard work. COVID-19 has kind of stopped many people’s lives but it’s good to know that there are so many people like you looking out for us. I hope that everyone can enjoy the holiday coming up. Even though families are limited with what they can do this year, I hope you and your family can find a way to have fun and relax.

— David Garside

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— Noah P.

Wrapping Up — Vaccine, New Measures Give Us Hope

This year I’m sure we’ve all learned to treasure any and all good news we get. So, although this week’s COVID-19 numbers continue to climb, we should be heartened by two developments this week. First, as mentioned earlier in this email, 3,900 doses of Pfizer vaccine will arrive in the province next week and certain healthcare workers will be included in this initial vaccination phase. Our COVID-19 Immunization Plan is expected to roll out over the next 12 months and possibly beyond, so these are very early days but we hope they represent the beginning of the end of the pandemic. Of course, until universal immunization is achieved, all Albertans need to follow public health guidelines — and expanded, provincewide measures announced by the Government of Alberta this week (outlined earlier in this email) are intended to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the province. As we all know, we need these measures to work. We need to bend the curve. The increases in new daily COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and ICU admissions are not sustainable, even in the short term. So please follow the new measures and urge your families, friends and neighbours to do the same. We know ‘tis the season to be with family and friends under normal circumstances but these are not normal days. Let’s all do our part to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe so we have a chance to celebrate together this time next year. Thank you for this — and for everything you do, each and every day.

As always, with gratitude and appreciation,

Dr. Verna Yiu
AHS President & CEO

Dr. Laura McDougall
Senior Medical Officer of Health