Patient Refusal to Wear Face Coverings during COVID-19: Guidance for Community Physicians and Teams

Overview

This guidance has been developed to support community physicians and their teams in reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 among patients and staff related to patient refusal to wear face coverings in clinic settings.

Guidance

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) has provided the following summarized guidance when patients refuse to wear face coverings in clinics:

1. Physicians have a responsibility to fully explain why a mask is required and to determine whether or not other options are possible under the clinical circumstances.
2. It is reasonable to reschedule routine care for:
   a. Confirmed cases of COVID-19 (10-day isolation)
   b. Individuals exhibiting COVID-like symptoms not related to pre-existing condition (10-day isolation)
   c. Individuals returning to Alberta after international travel (14-day isolation)
   d. Close contacts of confirmed cases of COVID-19 (14-day isolation)
3. Recommend virtual care for all patients who require routine care and do not want to wear a face covering.
4. Symptomatic or asymptomatic patients who are in need of urgent care and do not wear a face covering are able to be seen if proper social distancing practices and Infection and Control Protocols (ICP) are in place, most notably:
   a. Take patient into isolation room
   b. Proper PPE must be worn by the healthcare provider

Furthermore, AHS has suggested the following if patients refuse to wear face coverings:

1. Ask the patient to use hand sanitizer to disinfect their hands before they are moved to an isolation room.
2. Ask patient if donning a face shield would be helpful, depending on the circumstance as to why the patient refuses a face mask. This is optional and clinic PPE supplies should be considered.

Please Note

- It is not possible to create blanket policies that exclude patients from receiving in-person care for failing to wear a mask, as each patient encounter is unique.
- If you feel a patient is unreasonably jeopardizing the safety of your staff or other patients, consult with the Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA) for a medical-legal opinion on a clinic’s rights and obligations on patient masking and refusal of care. Email: inquiries@cmpa.org or Telephone: 1-800-267-6522.
- Albertans are encouraged to become familiar with all applicable laws and guidelines regarding masking based on their location and setting. These include the Chief Medical Officer of Health orders, applicable municipal bylaws and additional guidance developed by employers and business owners.
Albertans may be concerned about their ability to wear a mask based on pre-existing medical conditions. A person’s clinician would be best positioned to do an assessment regarding a medical reason making them unable to wear a mask. This may include the provision of an exemption to masking requirements if needed and appropriate. There is more information from the AHS COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group on the Evidence of Harm from Mask Use for Specific Populations.

More Information:
Email: phc@ahs.ca
Information for community physicians on COVID-19: www.ahs.ca/covidphc