

AHS Position Statement

Healthcare Workers with Underlying Medical Conditions and Potential Risk Factors for Severe COVID-19 Disease

This position statement is intended to provide general guidance only. Any AHS healthcare worker who is concerned about their personal risk factors should speak with their supervisor or appropriate Medical Staff leader regarding how to appropriately adhere to [IPC Recommendations for COVID-19](#), which may result in the consideration of redeployment options, if feasible. Any AHS healthcare worker who is unable to safely don and doff personal protective equipment due to a medical condition should speak with their supervisor or appropriate Medical Staff leader regarding the [workplace accommodation process](#).

1. Potential risk factors for severe disease with COVID-19 infection have been identified based on preliminary case series and descriptive reports from China, Italy, and the United States. The medical literature continues to emerge on this topic as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves and so it is acknowledged cited risk factors may change. In general, risk for hospital admission, more severe disease or death is higher with advanced age, or with one or more medical conditions including those which are listed here:
 - Age > 65 years^{1,2,3,4}
 - Incremental increase in risk for severe disease after age 70 years
 - Incremental increase in risk for severe disease after age 80 years
 - Cardiovascular Disease^{2,3,5}
 - Hypertension^{2,3,5}
 - Diabetes^{2,3,5}
 - Lung disease including moderate to severe asthma^{2,5,6}
 - Immunocompromised^{1,2}
 - Many conditions may cause a person to be immunocompromised. This may include medications such as prolonged high dose corticosteroid use, biologics, or other immune suppressing medications or cancer chemotherapies; HIV with AIDS; bone marrow or organ transplantation, or congenital immunodeficiencies.
 - Active malignancy^{4,6}
2. Healthcare workers are advised that general information relevant to other medical conditions is available on the AHS Additional Resources for Specific Health Conditions COVID-19 webpage (<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17033.aspx>).

3. Protecting the health and safety of healthcare workers is an imperative for employers and unions. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that the appropriate steps are taken to protect the health and safety of all healthcare workers in Alberta and prevent exposure to and transmission of COVID-19.⁷
4. In order to protect the health & safety of **all** healthcare workers with respect to COVID-19, appropriate steps include:
 - Using [Routine Practices](#) for all patients at all times, which includes a [point of care risk assessment](#);
 - Following the [respiratory illness algorithm](#) when assessing patients who present with influenza-like illness or COVID-19 symptoms;
 - Adhering to [IPC recommendations for COVID-19](#) when caring for a patient with suspected or confirmed COVID-19;
 - Ensuring that proper [donning](#) and [doffing](#) procedures are followed whenever personal protective equipment is worn;
 - Being diligent with [hand hygiene](#), and practicing physical distancing [at work](#) and in [community settings](#);
 - Staying home from work when ill, or when directed to do so because of travel history or unprotected* exposure to a COVID-19 case, in order to prevent potential transmission of infection to others.
- * unprotected exposure is defined as providing care to a COVID-19 patient, or having direct contact with infectious bodily fluids of a COVID-19 patient, while not wearing the [recommended personal protective equipment](#).
5. The precautions listed above are intended to be protective of **all** healthcare workers, including those who may have underlying medical conditions or advanced age. If the precautions listed above are followed, then the healthcare worker with an underlying medical condition or advanced age is not at greater risk of being exposed to the COVID-19 virus than any other healthcare worker.
6. Healthcare workers with underlying medical conditions or advanced age who can competently adhere to the precautions listed above do not need to be restricted from providing care to patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. No additional personal protective equipment measures or precautions are required for healthcare workers with underlying medical conditions or advanced age beyond those that are advised for any other healthcare worker.
7. Note that all AHS healthcare workers, regardless of any underlying medical condition(s) or advanced age, who are unable to fully adhere to the [IPC recommendations for COVID-19](#) (e.g. due to insufficient training, physical limitations, etc) should **not** provide care to patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

8. The [IPC recommendations for COVID-19](#) include the use of an N95 respirator when an [aerosol-generating medical procedure](#) is performed. All healthcare workers who are required to wear an N95 respirator must ensure that their N95 respirator fit test is up to date. In accordance with the AHS [Respiratory Protection Code of Practice](#), respirator fit testing must be conducted every two years, or whenever changes to a user's physical condition, including weight change, could affect the respirator fit.
9. Healthcare workers with chronic medical conditions or advanced age are advised to review the recommendations for physical distancing [at work](#) and in [community settings](#) in order to reduce their risk of acquiring infection with COVID-19 when they are not wearing personal protective equipment.
10. The above position statement and guidance applies to all care areas including dedicated COVID-19 wards or surgical suites. Clinical leaders and managers should seek support from their Human Resources advisor and Abilities Management, when reviewing staffing needs that may be impacted by staff with underlying medical conditions or advanced age.
11. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation, which may cause additional anxiety and stress for staff. AHS employees can find support through the [Employee and Family Assistance Program](#) (EFAP). EFAP is a free and confidential service available 24/7 at 1-877-273-3134, and offers a range of services to help AHS employees and their families navigate through work, health and life challenges. For physicians who are not AHS employees, the [Physician and Family Support Program](#) is available 24/7 at 1-877-767-4637. In addition, the [Psychologists' Association of Alberta](#) and [Canadian Psychological Association](#) are now connecting frontline healthcare providers who may be feeling stressed, overwhelmed or distressed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with members who are providing pro bono psychological services.

References

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3. Zhou F, Yu T, Du R, et al. Clinical course and risk factors for mortality of adult inpatients with COVID-19 in Wuhan, China: a retrospective cohort study. *Lancet* 2020; 395: 1054–62.
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5. Liang W, Guan W, Chen R, Wang W, Li J, Xu K, Li C, Ai Q, Lu W, Liang H, Li S, He J. Cancer patients in SARS-CoV-2 infection: a nationwide analysis in China. *Lancet Oncol.* 2020; 21(3): 335. Epub 2020 Feb 14.
6. World Health organization Q and A. <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>
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7. Joint Statement: COVID-19 and Personal Protective Equipment. March 26, 2020. <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/news/nr/ne-nr-2020-03-27-joint-statement-covid-ppe.pdf>