

FAQs for Patients/Public

Nirmatrelvir/ritonavir (Paxlovid™) Outpatient Treatment

Alberta Health Services (AHS) is offering a new medication, nirmatrelvir/ritonavir (Paxlovid™) to Albertans with mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms who are at greatest risk of developing severe COVID-19 infection. Eligible patients will receive a prescription for the oral medication and have it filled for free at select pharmacies throughout Alberta.

Paxlovid™ is not a replacement for immunization against COVID-19. Albertans are strongly encouraged to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

What is Paxlovid™?

Paxlovid™ is a new anti-viral medication that is made up of two medications, nirmatrelvir and ritonavir, that are taken in pill form together by mouth twice a day for five days.

Has Paxlovid™ been approved for use?

Health Canada has authorized the use of Paxlovid™ to treat mild to moderate COVID-19 infection that has been confirmed by testing. Learn more on the [Health Canada Consumer Information Summary](#) for Paxlovid™.

What is Paxlovid™ used for?

Health Canada has authorized the use of Paxlovid™ to treat mild to moderate COVID-19 infection that has been confirmed by testing. Paxlovid™ is used to prevent these symptoms from getting worse in people who have a high risk of needing to go to the hospital for COVID-19.

Who can get Paxlovid™?

In Alberta, Paxlovid™ is approved for adults at high risk from COVID-19 (see below) who:

- have a positive test for COVID-19
- have mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms
- can receive the medication within five days from when symptoms started

Treatment will be offered to patients who are most likely to develop severe COVID-19 illness and are at a greater risk of being hospitalized. The evidence around who is most at risk for severe outcomes is evolving. These criteria will continue to be reviewed.

Treatment eligibility:

Age	0 to 1 dose	2 doses	3 doses	Regardless of Vaccine Status
18+ with one or more pre-existing health conditions or pregnancy	✓	✗	✗	✗

55+ or Indigenous 45+	✓	✗	✗	✗
60+ or Indigenous 50+ with one or more pre-existing health conditions	✓	✓	✗	✗
70+ or Indigenous 60+ with 2 or more pre-existing health conditions	✓	✓	✓	✗
Immunocompromised*	✓	✓	✓	✓
Living in long-term care or designated supportive living	✓	✓	✓	✓

*Immunocompromised patients under 18 years of age should consult with their specialist for consideration of treatment. Transplant patients should **NOT** be offered Paxlovid™ due to the potential for life-threatening drug interactions.

1. Unvaccinated or have received one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and are either:

- Age 55 or older
- Indigenous, and age 45 or older
- Age 18 and older with a pre-existing health condition*
- Pregnant

2. Two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine and are either:

- Age 60 or older AND have ONE or more pre-existing health condition(s)*
- Indigenous and 50 years of age or older AND have ONE or more pre-existing health condition(s)*

3. Three doses of a COVID-19 vaccine and are either:

- Age 70 or older AND have TWO or more pre-existing health condition(s)
- Indigenous and 60 years or older AND have TWO or more pre-existing health condition(s)*

4. Immunocompromised (regardless of vaccination status), due to reasons including, but not limited to:

- have received a transplant – solid organ or stem cell (Transplant patients should **NOT** receive Paxlovid™ due to the potential for life-threatening drug interactions but are eligible for other therapies, such as Remdesivir. Transplant patients should be assessed and treated through the centralized Outpatient Treatment Program by calling 1-844-343-0971 or through their transplant specialist. All prescribers in the community including Primary Care physicians, Nurse Practitioners and Pharmacists should refer transplant patients to the centralized team or the patient's specialist/team.
- is an oncology (cancer) patient who has received a dose of any IV or oral chemotherapy or other immunosuppressive treatment since December 2020
- has an inflammatory condition (rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, inflammatory bowel disease) and has received a dose of any systemic immunosuppressive treatment since December 2020.

5. Living in long-term care or some designated supportive living sites (DSL4 and 4D), regardless of vaccination status.

* Pre-existing Health Conditions include:

- diabetes (taking medication for treatment)
- obesity (BMI >30)
- chronic kidney disease (estimated glomerular filtration rate, <60 ml per minute per 1.73 m² of body-surface area)
- congestive heart failure (New York Heart Association class II, III, or IV)
- chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and moderate-to-severe asthma

Paxlovid™ is not a replacement for immunization against COVID-19. **Albertans are strongly encouraged to get fully immunized against COVID-19.** If you receive Paxlovid™, you should wait until you are fully recovered from the infection before getting a COVID-19 vaccine to ensure you get maximum benefit from the vaccine.

Patients will be required to provide a list of all current over-the-counter and herbal medications during their assessment. For a complete list of medications that may interact with Paxlovid™, visit the [Health Canada Consumer Information Summary](#).

Why is this medication limited to people with COVID symptoms for less than five days?

Paxlovid™ has been shown to work best when it is used early, before the virus has moved beyond a mild to moderate infection. If you have [symptoms of COVID-19](#), it's important to get tested as soon as possible. This gives AHS time to determine if you are eligible for Paxlovid™.

Can Paxlovid™ be used in patients under 18 years of age?

For patients aged 12 to 17, there has been no research on Paxlovid™ use. Paxlovid™ is not approved for use in those under 18 years of age at this time. Alternative treatment can be considered for patients 12 to 17 years of age.

How were the eligibility criteria determined?

Eligibility criteria were determined by a panel of experts based on medical research and Alberta-specific data that helped to identify groups of patients with higher chances of serious outcomes from COVID-19 disease.

Why is pregnancy included if pregnant patients were not included in the study?

Pregnancy was included because Health Canada has licensed use of Paxlovid™ in pregnant women where the potential benefits of treatment outweigh potential risks to the fetus.

How will eligible patients be identified and informed?

If you are 18 years of age or older and test positive for COVID-19, you will be told about outpatient treatments in a text message from AHS that notifies you of your positive COVID-19 test result if you have received a lab-confirmed test. You may also hear about treatments from your family doctor or another healthcare provider.

If you fall into one of the categories above and are interested in getting the treatment or learning more about Paxlovid™, follow the instructions in the text message you receive confirming that you have COVID-19. You may also ask your family physician if you tested positive using an at-home Rapid Antigen Test. Visit ahs.ca/covidopt to determine if you are eligible. If you meet the criteria and you don't have a family physician or your physician isn't prescribing Paxlovid yet, you should **leave a message at 1-844-343-0971**. Staff will call you back and ask you some questions before referring

you to a healthcare professional who will determine if you are eligible to receive treatment and what treatment is best suited to you.

If you are a transplant patient, tell your medical specialist or specialized healthcare team if you test positive for COVID-19. A member of your healthcare team will answer your questions, and help determine if you are eligible for treatment.

If you are a resident of a Long-Term Care or Designated Supportive Living facility, a primary care physician or nurse practitioner can prescribe Paxlovid™ to you if you are deemed eligible.

AHS is in the process of transitioning the prescribing of Paxlovid™ to Primary Care providers. Some Primary Care providers and pharmacists are already prescribing Paxlovid™. For more information, please speak to your family physician or pharmacist.

What if I tested positive using an at-home Rapid Antigen Test?

If you have symptoms of COVID-19, have received a positive test result from a rapid/at-home test and are eligible for treatment (see above) there are two options;

1. Contact your family physician to book an assessment,

OR

2. Call **the dedicated line at 1-844-343-0971** and leave a message. A staff member will call you back to ask some initial questions before referring you to a healthcare provider on the Outpatient Treatment Program team.

AHS is in the process of transitioning the prescribing of Paxlovid™ to Primary Care physicians and pharmacists. Some family physicians and pharmacists are already prescribing Paxlovid™ to their patients.

How is Paxlovid™ administered?

Paxlovid™ is taken in pill form. One dose consists of three pills that are taken twice a day over five days. Patients with a reduced kidney function may have their dose reduced to two pills twice a day for five days.

How come I have been asked to provide a list of current medications?

Paxlovid™ can interact with other medications. Providing a list of your current medications, including over the counter drugs, herbal and natural products, during your assessment will assist the clinicians in determining which treatment is best suited for you. If you do not have a current medication list, please contact your community pharmacy and they will be able to provide you with one.

For a complete list of medications that may interact with Paxlovid™, visit the [Health Canada Consumer Information summary](#).

How can I pick up my prescription for Paxlovid™?

Paxlovid™ is available through a limited number of community pharmacies throughout the province. The physician who determines that you are eligible to receive Paxlovid™ will advise you of the closest pharmacy that is stocking Paxlovid™. A prescription for Paxlovid™ will be sent to the pharmacy closest to you.

Is there a charge for my Paxlovid™ prescription?

No. Paxlovid™ is covered and paid for by Alberta Health. If you are eligible for the treatment, you can have your prescription filled for free.

Can I pick up my prescription myself?

As an individual must have active COVID-19 in order to qualify for treatment, it is important to stay home, self-isolate and limit your contacts with other people. If you cannot have another person pick up your prescription, the approved pharmacies also offer delivery service or curb-side pickup.

What if there are no community pharmacies in my area stocking Paxlovid™?

Alberta Health is working with community pharmacies in every geographic location in the province. Should the closest pharmacy to you be too far away, the assessing physician will follow up to determine what other options might be available.

How will I be monitored after receiving Paxlovid™?

If you take Paxlovid™, a healthcare provider will call you within about two days. You will also get an information sheet with your prescription.

After the follow-up call, you should continue to monitor your health. Tell your family doctor or usual healthcare provider about any side effects or COVID-19 symptoms that get worse. Or call Health Link at 811 to speak to a registered nurse. For urgent help, call 911.

You should also follow up with your family doctor or healthcare provider 10 days after your COVID-19 symptoms started.

What are the possible side effects of Paxlovid™?

According to [Health Canada](#), reported side effects include:

- altered sense of taste
- diarrhea
- muscle pain
- vomiting
- high blood pressure
- headache

Paxlovid™ is relatively new, so you may experience unexpected side effects. Please report any side effects to your family doctor. For more details on avoiding potential side effects and what to watch for, see the [Health Canada Consumer Information Summary](#).

What should I do if my COVID-19 symptoms get worse?

Even after taking Paxlovid™, your COVID-19 symptoms may continue or get worse.

- Monitor your health and tell the healthcare provider about your symptoms when they call you after your treatment.
- Call Health Link at 811 or your healthcare provider/family doctor if you have more questions or concerns.
- Call 911 right away if you have severe symptoms such as:
 - difficulty breathing
 - severe chest pain
 - feelings of confusion
 - loss of consciousness

Learn more about [managing your COVID-19 symptoms](#).

Can I get vaccinated for COVID-19 after I take Paxlovid™?

Yes. But you should wait until you have fully recovered from COVID-19. This allows your body to respond to the vaccine and develop a good level of antibodies. Paxlovid™ is not a replacement for immunization against COVID-19. **Albertans are strongly encouraged to get fully immunized against COVID-19.**

What if my COVID-19 symptoms rebound after initially getting better on Paxlovid™?

A small portion of patients may see their symptoms return within a few days of completing a course of treatment. This may be accompanied by a new positive test for COVID-19, after testing negative. At this time, it is NOT recommended that treatment be extended or repeated. See above regarding what to do if your COVID-19 symptoms get worse.

If I get treated with Paxlovid™, will it prevent me from getting Long COVID?

Some patients get prolonged symptoms after recovering from COVID-19. Although there are reports in the media of Paxlovid™ preventing this from happening, there is not currently enough medical research to support this. If you recover from COVID-19 and develop what you think are Long COVID symptoms, call Health Link at 811 or your healthcare provider/family doctor.

Can I get a prescription for Paxlovid™ for my Long COVID symptoms?

Although there are some reports of Paxlovid™ benefiting patients with Long COVID, there is not currently enough medical research supporting this use. Please call Health Link at 811 or your healthcare provider/family doctor if you have questions or concerns about symptoms of Long COVID.

What if I test positive for COVID-19 again? Can I take Paxlovid™ more than once?

If you test positive for a second COVID-19 infection, Paxlovid™ can be prescribed again, but you are encouraged to get vaccinated against COVID-19 90 days after you are no longer symptomatic.

Why is Alberta using this drug?

Paxlovid™ can prevent mild to moderate COVID-19 from becoming more severe and requiring people to be admitted to the hospital. Paxlovid™ can be especially helpful for patients who might otherwise have a high risk of being hospitalized or developing more serious health problems due to COVID-19.

Is Paxlovid™ being used elsewhere?

Yes. Outpatient treatments like Paxlovid™ and Remdesivir are currently being used in many areas of Canada. AHS is working with other health authorities in Canada to learn how they are using this treatment.

Why hasn't this drug been considered before now?

Paxlovid™ is a new treatment for COVID-19 that was only recently approved by Health Canada. For more information, see the [Health Canada Consumer Information Summary](#).

For more information on the AHS rollout of all outpatient COVID-19 treatments, visit ahs.ca/covidopt.