FAQ on Patient Care and Testing – for Community Physicians

August 18, 2021

What's happening in Alberta?
Alberta continues to see cases of COVID-19. For current case count and additional information for travellers, schools, daycares, employers and all Albertans, visit www.alberta.ca/covid19.

Community physicians and their teams can email phc@ahs.ca with questions related to COVID-19.

Other COVID-19 FAQS for community physicians:
- COVID-19 Immunization
- COVID-19 IPC and Exposure

Issued by the PCN Incident Response Task Force for COVID-19

FAQ sections and list of topics
Navigation tips: Click the section heading to jump to that section. Desktop/laptop users can also use “Ctrl +F” to search the document for keywords.

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- COVID-19 variants
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- Physicians’ notes
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Topics of Current Interest

1. What is the current guidance for testing of close contacts?
   Asymptomatic testing is no longer recommended. Testing will continue to be available for individuals who are symptomatic.
   • If a close contact develops symptoms they are required to isolate and get tested as soon as possible.

2. Where can I get information on COVID-19 variants of concern in Alberta?
   • Visit here for the most up-to-date information on variants of concern.
   • Please see the FAQ for Community Physicians on IPC and Exposure for more information regarding notifications of variant cases and close contacts.
   • For more information on testing for Variants of Concern, see this APL Bulletin.
   • For more information on the public health and health system impacts of variants of concern please see the COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group’s Rapid Evidence Review: Public Health and Health Systems Impacts of SARS-CoV-2 Variants of Concern (VOC).

3. How will I know if my patient has tested positive for a variant?
   Effective June 1, 2021, variant of concern (VOC) testing will recommence for all COVID-19 positive samples.
   More information in this APL Bulletin.

   VOC positive results will be available on Netcare and Connect Care.

   For more information on how community physicians are notified of COVID-19 test results, see this question.

Post-COVID-19 Recovery

4. Updated What information is currently available to help me care for patients with persistent, long-term, post-COVID-19 symptoms?
   Getting Healthy after COVID-19 is a webpage that has many patient and provider resources available such as:
• **How to Support Your Recovery and Rehabilitation After COVID-19:** This is a resource to help patients understand the effects of COVID-19 and cope with the health challenges they may have after COVID-19. It can also help them make a plan with you, their healthcare provider, to improve their health and manage their symptoms.

• The Alberta Healthy Living Program in Calgary Zone has recently added new Post-COVID health education classes entitled **Helping You Feel Better After COVID-19**. These classes are open to all zones/*any* Albertan over the age of 18 and are free of charge. For more details or to register: Register through our [online Course Catalog](#) or Call 403-943-2584 (long distance charges may apply).

• AHS has developed the resource **Long COVID-19 Symptoms or Health Concerns for Patients FAQ**

As well here is a list of provider resources:

• **Rehabilitation & Allied Health Practice Considerations: Post COVID-19** is a guidance document created for Allied Health practitioners, to assist clinicians in treating post COVID-19 patients.

• **Post COVID-19 Rehabilitation Response Appendices: Pathways, Toolkit & Resources** includes a list of provider resources in Appendix J.

• A **Nutrition Guideline for Post-COVID-19: Nutrition for Recovery and Rehabilitation** provides:
  o Health professionals with consistent, evidence-based messaging for adults following a COVID-19 infection.
  o Answers to commonly asked questions.
  o Awareness for currently known nutrition-related post-COVID-19 side effects that may put adult patients at increased nutrition risk.

• Links to resources such as this British Medical Journal article on “Management of post-acute COVID-19 in primary care,” that may assist providers in caring for patients with post-COVID-19 conditions.

• As well, AHS has developed the resource **Long COVID-19 Symptoms of Health Concerns for Healthcare Providers FAQ**

5. **What post-COVID-19 recovery clinics are available with a referral from a family physician?**
The following clinics assess and follow post-COVID-19 patients discharged from hospitals or referred from the community, to detect and treat post-COVID-19 complications as early as possible.

**Edmonton**

- Edmonton North Primary Care Network [COVID-19 Recovery Clinic](#)
- Pulmonary Care Clinic: University of Alberta [Kaye Edmonton Clinic](#)
  o For patients discharged from the UAH or other Connect Care facilities: Please send electronic referral in Connect Care, Pulmonology, provider: Giovanni Ferrara or Ronald Damant, reason: COVID follow up or post-COVID specialist evaluation.
  o For external referrals (community or hospitals/facilities not yet on Connect Care): Please send referral via fax, 780-492-4483, pulmonary consultation, provider Giovanni Ferrara or Ronald Damant, reason: COVID follow up or Post-COVID specialist evaluation.

**Calgary**

- Respiratory Clinic: [Peter Lougheed Centre](#)
  o Please refer patients through the Alberta Referral Directory
- Respiratory Clinic: [Rockyview General Hospital](#)
  o Please refer patients through the Alberta Referral Directory

6. **Is there a phone number my patients can call if they have rehabilitation needs while recovering from COVID-19 or if they have other rehabilitation concerns?**
A new toll-free [Rehabilitation Advice Line](#), 1-833-379-0563, is available for Albertans over the age of 18 who:

- Have existing health conditions that affect muscles, bones and joints – including those awaiting or recovering from surgery, or
- Have existing disabilities related to neurological conditions (e.g., Parkinson’s, Spinal Cord Injury, MS, Brain Injury, Stroke), or
• Are recovering from COVID-19.

The Rehabilitation Advice Line gives callers information about:
• Activities and exercises that help with physical concerns
• Strategies to manage the day-to-day activities affected by these concerns
• Rehabilitation services that are open for in-person and/or virtual visits
• Community-based organizations

How the line keeps patients connected to primary care:
• The Rehabilitation Advice Line will provide referral letters back to a caller’s primary care provider outlining the reason for their call and the recommendations/advice that was provided.
• Those callers without a primary care provider will be encouraged to call Health Link 811 to be connected with a provider in their area.

An Alberta-only line, the Rehabilitation Advice line is answered by Allied Health clinicians and operates every day from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Patient Care

7. Are there pathways for community physicians to use when determining how to care for patients with suspected/confirmed or post COVID-19?

Some zones have developed various pathways to help physicians stratify patients with COVID-19 as high, average or lower risk. The pathways provide clinical guidance for managing patients who test positive or have post COVID-19 symptoms and include options for accessing specialist advice.

Here is where you can access zonal pathways:

Calgary Zone
• COVID-19 Primary Care Management Pathways (adult and pediatric)

Central Zone:
• COVID-19 Primary Care Management Pathways (adult and pediatric)

Edmonton Zone:
• COVID-19 Primary Care Management Pathways (adult and pediatric)

North Zone
• COVID-19 Primary Care Management Pathways (adult and pediatric)

Chinook PCN:
• COVID-19 Primary Care Management Pathways (adult)

The AHS COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group also conducted this rapid review of risk tools or tests that can assist in deciding who is at risk of clinical deterioration and should be assessed in the emergency department.

8. What are the recommendations for patients receiving cancer treatment who are infected with COVID-19?

Please see the COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group’s Rapid Evidence Report: Cancer treatment after a COVID-19 infection for updated recommendations that supersede recommendations in previous versions of the document.

9. Can colchicine be used to treat COVID-19?

At this time colchicine should not be prescribed or taken to treat COVID-19.

10. Can ivermectin be used to prevent or treat COVID-19?
At this time, ivermectin should not be prescribed or taken to prevent COVID-19 outside of a clinical trial. Studies are underway and will be important to determine whether ivermectin is useful as treatment or prevention.


11. What resources are available for individuals who require translation support?
Community specialist physicians and community primary care physicians can sign up to access language interpretation services over the phone through a service called Language Line - a professional medical interpretation company contracted by AHS. Language Line provides language translation for over 240 languages and is available 24/7 for a cost. Please see Language Line Interpretation Services for Community Physicians for more information.

AHS.ca has a page on their external website to help health professionals access current COVID-19 signage and posters. Many posters are available in multiple languages. For COVID-19 social distancing videos, visit the AHS Translated Resources page.

12. How can community physicians support safe care transitions after patients are discharged from hospital?
Acute and primary care can work together to safely transition COVID-19 patients from home into hospital and back home. This Transitions Checklist for Primary Care from the Alberta Medical Association outlines actions primary care teams can take to improve transitions.

13. Where can community physicians find information about support-care services for patients during COVID-19?
211 connects Albertans to a full range of community, government, social and health services 24/7 via phone, text and chat. It’s free, confidential and available in over 170 languages. Text and online chat services are available province-wide and its phone service is available to over 60 per cent of Albertans:

To reach 211, dial 2-1-1, text INFO to 211 or visit www.ab.211.ca and click “live chat.”

14. Where can community primary care physicians go for specialist advice on caring for patients who are presumed or confirmed with COVID-19?
Two COVID-19 tele-advice services are available for primary care providers in Alberta. Providers can request specialist advice on caring for presumed and confirmed COVID-19 patients who are recovering at home. Please see this COVID-19 Tele-advice for Primary Care document for more information on how to request advice in your zone.

15. What patient resources are available for specific conditions and COVID-19, including pregnancy?
AHS has a section on their website for Guidance on Specific Health Conditions during COVID-19.

16. What resource is available for patients struggling with addictions and mental health during COVID-19?
AHS has developed the following new resource booklet, Coping with COVID-19: Addiction & Mental Health, to create awareness around existing resources to cope with COVID-19.

17. UPDATED Under what circumstances are community physicians expected to provide physician notes?

- **For isolation:** No physician’s note required. As of March 5, 2020, employees don’t need a medical note in order to access job-protected leave for quarantine due to COVID-19, and according to The Alberta Teachers’
Association, most school boards have waived the requirement for a doctor’s note. Isolation hotels will no longer be available after Aug 16. Note: Quarantine for close contacts has shifted from mandatory to recommended. Isolation for anyone with COVID-19 symptoms and for confirmed positive cases is still required.

- **For work leave due to pre-existing conditions (for example, a compromised immune system):** A physician’s note may be required. The Alberta Teachers’ Association suggests teachers discuss their situation with their doctor. If they are required to be absent from work due to medical reasons, they should acquire a medical note to access medical leave. Medical notes are required in most collective agreements for teachers. Patients can also use this COVID-19 personal risk severity assessment to better understand their risks.

- **For mask exemption:** Many of Alberta’s masking restrictions were rescinded, but will continue to be required for staff, patients and visitors in all AHS settings. Any Albertan seeking a medical exemption from mask use due to a verified health condition must have an exemption letter from a physician, nurse practitioner or psychologist.

  Please see the original announcement and physician note templates found [here](#). Please see CPSA guidelines and resources for physicians on masking and exemptions [here](#).

- **For return to work or school:**
  - The Government of Alberta has no expectation that physician notes are provided for exempting individuals from return to work or return to school.
  - Individual employers and school authorities may elect to require physician notes, but this is not a requirement of Government of Alberta COVID-19 guidance.
  - If a patient insists that they require a physician note, the physician should assess the patient’s request and if appropriate issue the note. A fee can be charged to the patient for this service. Physician notes are not covered under the Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan.

- **For care of a loved one:** No physician’s note required. As of March 17, 2020, employees are entitled to a job-protected leave for a period of time that is necessary to meet the employee’s family responsibilities to care for ill or isolated family members, or children affected by school and daycare closures. A medical note is not required to go on leave.

18. What resources are available to help me provide virtual care to my patients?

- The Alberta Medical Association has resources to help providers understand virtual care options.
- The CPSA has also issued advice on virtual care during the COVID-19 pandemic including what care can be provided virtually, consent, documentation, billing and resources.
- To learn more about the evidence on the impact of virtual visits compared with in-person visits, the AHS COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group has conducted a rapid review on virtual vs. in-person visits.
- The Canadian Medical Protective Association has multiple telehealth and virtual care resources.

19. I'm a community physician and have provided virtual care. What billing code(s) should I use?

- In March, the Government of Alberta introduced new and expanded billing codes for virtual care to aid in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Community physicians providing virtual care were encouraged to use these codes to receive compensation.
- In June, the Government of Alberta announced that virtual care codes introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will remain in the Schedule of Medical benefits permanently.
- Permanent billing codes include patient visits, consultations and mental health services provided over the phone or through secure video conference.
- Please see this bulletin from the Government of Alberta for more information.
- The Alberta Medical Association (AMA) also has more information on billing codes [here](#).
- Provide virtual care as per CPSA guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic.
20. Will I be covered by the Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA) if I provide care outside my normal scope of practice?

- The CMPA has launched a COVID-19 Hub to provide up-to-date medical-legal information, advice and support on questions that arise during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The CPSA also has information posted on its site about scope of practice issues.

Patient Travel Advice

21. UPDATED What should I recommend to patients regarding travel?

Travelers should be familiar with and follow all federal government requirements as outlined https://travel.gc.ca/travel-covid. Fully-immunized travel exemptions have been put in place as of July 5; otherwise, travellers must comply with the 14-day quarantine required by the Federal Quarantine Act. The federal government continues to recommend avoiding non-essential international travel.

22. What do I tell patients who ask for documentation of COVID-19 testing for travel outside of Canada?

If patients are travelling outside of Canada and require testing as proof of negative COVID-19 status, all Albertans can access a new COVID-19 travel testing service, offered by Dynalife Medical Labs, for $150/traveler. There are other private organizations offering this service for a fee as well.

COVID-19 Testing

23. What are the current testing and isolation requirements for symptomatic adults and children who are not returned international travellers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fever, cough, shortness of breath, loss of sense of taste or smell</th>
<th>Runny nose, sore throat</th>
<th>Stuffy nose, painful swallowing, headache, chills, muscle or joint aches, feeling unwell, new fatigue or severe exhaustion, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, conjunctivitis</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child/Youth</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
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<td>3</td>
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1) If your patient has any of these symptoms, not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition, they should be tested for COVID-19 and are legally required to isolate for 10 days from when the symptom(s) started.

- They must stay home except to be tested or to receive urgent medical care following the precautions outlined here. They may not work or attend any public place while waiting for test results.
- If your patient has a negative test result and they are feeling better, they can resume normal activities, even if the 10 days is not completed.

2) If your patient has only 1 of these symptoms, they should stay home. If their symptom is improving after 24 hours, they can return to school and other activities when they feel well enough to go. Testing is not necessary.

- If the symptom worsens after 24 hours OR if they have 2 or more of these symptoms, testing is recommended but not required. The child can return to activities and school when their symptoms have resolved AND it’s been at least 24 hours since their symptoms started.

3) If your patient has these symptoms they should isolate and be tested for COVID-19.
• Anyone with active symptoms (even mild ones) should remain at home until their symptoms are gone. However, if they are feeling better they can resume regular activities, even if their test result is not back yet.

• If the COVID-19 test comes back positive, the patient will be legally required to isolate at that time.

If your patient fits in more than one category (e.g., has a runny nose and is a close contact of a confirmed case), the isolation requirements would be whichever are the longest. Specific requirements also exist in high-risk settings such as acute care and congregate care facilities. The most up-to-date guidance on isolation and testing can be found at Alberta Health and Alberta Health Services.

24. Will I be notified of my patient’s COVID-19 test results?
You will be notified of your patient’s COVID-19 test results if your patient chooses your name and proper location when filling out the COVID-19 Online Assessment and Booking tool or when being referred for testing. You will receive test results via your preferred method of lab communication (Netcare, fax, etc.) as you would any other lab results.

- COVID-19 notifications are only sent to one primary care provider. Results are sent to the primary provider selected by the patient when completing the online booking tool.
- Patients can choose from a list that includes family doctors, nurse practitioners or pediatricians.

If you are not receiving results, please refer to this lab-routing memo for help trouble shooting.

25. UPDATED Who is eligible for testing in Alberta?
• As of July 29, 2021, COVID-19 testing is available:
  For Albertans:
  o Albertans with symptoms of COVID-19;
  o Albertans who are linked to a known outbreak, whether symptomatic or not;
  o Albertans who need COVID-19 testing for outgoing travel (provided by DynaLife Medical Labs and other private providers such as pharmacies for a fee);
  o Albertans who receive a positive result from a rapid COVID-19 Point-of-Care Test, through workplace or community asymptomatic screening.

  For Symptomatic Healthcare Workers, Group Home and Shelter Workers, School Teachers and/or School Staff
  o Symptomatic Albertans in the areas listed below are eligible for testing for COVID-19. They can also book an appointment for testing online if they live within 75 kms from a testing assessment centre.
    o Healthcare workers;
    o School teachers and/or school staff;
    o Group home, disability support and shelter workers;
    o Correctional facility staff in provincial / federal facilities; and
    o Individuals who provide services in a clinical care setting including hospitals, clinics, pharmacies.

  • Testing can be booked online by visiting www.ahs.ca/covid. If using the Internet is not an option, individuals can call 811 to book an appointment.
  • Healthcare workers can use the Self-Assessment Tool for Healthcare Workers and School Teachers and/or School Staff.
  • Members of the public can continue to use the online assessment tool.
  • Please note that anyone with a cough, fever, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, runny nose, sore throat or loss of sense of taste or smell not related to a pre-existing illness or health condition is legally required to isolate for a minimum of 10 days from the start of symptoms, or until symptoms resolve, whichever is longer; however, these individuals ARE allowed to leave home to come for testing.
  • Note that minors and mature students with only one observed symptom that resolves itself within 24 hours are exempt from the need to test or isolate.
26. **Do individuals who have tested positive and gone into isolation need to be re-tested and get a negative result before returning to work or normal activities?**

No, proof of a negative COVID-19 test and/or a medical note is not required to return to school, work or activities once the isolation period is complete. This guidance can be found on the Alberta Health website.

If your patient tests positive and isolates for the required, mandatory period, there is no need to be tested again. Re-testing someone within 90 days of a positive test is not effective or appropriate. Evidence is clear that unless an individual has an immune compromising condition, they are not infectious to others after 10 days have passed from the start of their symptoms, as long as their symptoms have resolved.

For more information, please see Dr. Deena Hinshaw's [COVID-19 Update](https://www.ahs.ca/covid) from December 21, 2020.

27. **Do children need to show proof of negative results to return to school or daycare?**

No, there is no Government of Alberta requirement to provide evidence of negative results prior to returning to school for a student, teacher or staff member. AHS Public Health will contact all confirmed cases and provide them clear direction on isolation. Parents should follow the guidance at [ahs.ca/parentcovidguide](https://www.ahs.ca/parentcovidguide).

28. **What do I advise patients who want a copy of their children’s test results?**

- Individuals will not receive written or email documentation of their test results from AHS Public Health.
- Primary healthcare providers can provide a copy of a child’s COVID-19 results as per your normal processes.
- Parents and guardians can [now access the COVID-19 test results](https://www.ahs.ca/parentcovidguide) for children under the age of 18 through [MyHealth Records](https://www.ahs.ca/myhealthrecords). To access children’s test results, parents need to provide their personal health number and the date of their child’s COVID-19 test.
- Albertans age 14 and older could already access their COVID-19 test results on [MyHealth Records](https://www.ahs.ca/myhealthrecords) immediately after signing up without waiting for mail-out verification.
- Parents and guardians will receive a text with their child’s results from AHS if they consent to that option.

29. **What are the recommendations for COVID-19 specimen collection?**

APL is asking physicians to use nasopharyngeal or throat swabs recommended and distributed by APL/AHS specifically for COVID-19 testing. This [COVID-19 Collection Kit Guidance](https://www.ahs.ca/covid) provides instructions for how to use different kinds of collection kits.

If collecting a sample for COVID-19 testing in a clinic or hospital, the [COVID-19 and Other Respiratory Viruses Requisition](https://www.ahs.ca/covid) or the hospital's clinical information system (eg, Connect Care, Sunrise Clinical Manager, Meditech) can be used to order the test. If directing a patient to the online booking tool or 811 for testing at an assessment centre, the assessment centre will use their own Zone-specific requisition for ordering COVID-19 testing.

**Please note:** Do not use APTIMA® Multitest or Unisex Swabs for COVID-19 testing. APTIMA® swab specimen collection kits are the only collection kits available for Chlamydia trachomatis (CT) and Neisseria gonorrhoeae (GC) nucleic acid testing in Alberta. These swabs are in short supply due to global demand. More information in this [laboratory bulletin](https://www.ahs.ca/covid).

30. **How should COVID-19 swabs be transported?**

Follow the labelling and transport instructions given in the collection kit insert. More information on specimen collection can be found in this [COVID-19 Collection Kit Guidance](https://www.ahs.ca/covid).

For additional concerns, contact the switchboard numbers below and request to page the ProvLab Virologist on call:

- Calgary (FMC) at 403-944-1110
- Edmonton (UAH) at 780-407-8822
31. **Do I need to let a Medical Officer of Health (MOH) or Communicable Disease Control (CDC) know that I have sent a swab for COVID-19 testing?**
There is no need to advise the MOH/CDC (Public Health) that a COVID-19 test has been ordered. Public Health is working with Alberta Precision Laboratories to closely monitor positive test results from across the province.

32. **UPDATED How can homebound patients be tested for COVID-19?**
Please see the Community Paramedic Response Team Referral Form. Indicate that the patient has limitations to leaving the home. Community paramedics are not always doing in home swabbing. Public Health will assess case by case.

33. **Do patients who receive a positive point of care test (POCT) need to be retested?**
If the patient is symptomatic and within seven days of symptom onset, a POCT result that is positive is regarded as a true positive and further testing is not required.

More information on [Rapid COVID-19 Point-of-Care Testing](#) is available on the AHS website.