novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

FAQ on Patient Care and Testing – for Community Physicians

January 26, 2022

What's happening in Alberta?
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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.

➢ Topics of Current Interest
  o NEW Paxlovid treatment for COVID-19
  o NEW Serology Testing
  o UPDATED Sotrovimab treatment for COVID-19
  o Long COVID-19 symptom allied health resources and posters
  o NEW Testing for COVID-19
  o UPDATED COVID-19 variants

➢ Post COVID-19 Recovery
  o UPDATED Patients with persistent, long-term, post-COVID-19 symptoms
  o UPDATED Post COVID-19 clinics
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Topics of Current Interest

1. **NEW** What information is available for Paxlovid, a new oral antiviral treatment for patients with COVID-19 that was recently approved by Health Canada?

   Paxlovid is a new anti-viral drug that has been shown to prevent COVID-19 from progressing in high risk patients with mild to moderate symptoms, if taken within five days of symptom onset. Paxlovid is made up of two medications – Nirmatrelvir and Ritonavir – in pill form that are taken together twice a day for five days. More information will be posted [here](#) soon.

2. **NEW** What is the current recommendations around serology testing for COVID-19?

   Please see this [APL Lab Bulletin](#) with updated info about serology testing for COVID-19, including an updated FAQ.

3. **UPDATED** What information is available for Sotrovimab, a new monoclonal antibody treatment for patients with COVID-19 that was recently approved by Health Canada?

   Sotrovimab is a new drug that was developed to treat patients with mild to moderate symptoms of COVID-19. It is the first treatment to be offered to outpatients and inpatients in Alberta and is administered by intravenous infusion *within five days of symptom onset*. Importantly, Health Canada states that they have “authorized the sale of this COVID-19 drug based on limited clinical testing in humans and/or quality information.”

   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. This includes:
   - People who have not received any doses of a COVID-19 vaccine and are:
     - 55 years of age and older, regardless of other health conditions
     - 18 years of age and older with a co-morbidity:
       - 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
     - Pregnancy
   - Regardless of their COVID-19 vaccine status, immunocompromised patients, including:
     - Transplant patients (solid organ or stem cell)
Oncology patients that have received a dose of any IV or oral chemotherapy or other immunosuppressive treatment since December 2020

Patients with inflammatory conditions (e.g., rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, inflammatory bowel disease) who have received a dose of any systemic immunosuppressive treatment since December 2020. The COVID-19 Therapeutics Working Group notes the following treatments may be of concern, however patients on any biologic treatment may be eligible for treatment (list adapted from the American College of Rheumatology guidance. COVID-19-Vaccine-Clinical-Guidance-Rheumatic-Diseases-Summary.pdf (rheumatology.org):

- Rituximab, ocrelizumab
- High dose steroids (≥ 2 mg/kg/day or 20 mg/day if weight > 10 kg, for ≥ 14 days)
- Other biologics: Abatacept, Belimumab (as per ACR recommendations)
- JAKs inhibitors: Tofacitinib, Upadacitinib, Baricitinib
- Immunosuppressive/immune-modulator treatments: mycophenolate, cyclophosphamide, azathioprine, cyclosporine, tacrolimus, IVIG, Methotrexate, leflunomide, sulfasalazine, apremilast

Patients who have tested positive for COVID-19 and whose symptoms began less than four days ago can call 1-844-343-0971 to find out if they qualify to receive sotrovimab.

Please see Outpatient Treatment for COVID-19 | Alberta Health Services for more information and resources for patients and healthcare providers.

4. Is there a Long COVID-19 guide and symptoms poster available for clinics to post?
Consult the Post-COVID Rehabilitation & Allied Health Practice Considerations guide. Long COVID-19 Symptoms posters are now available in sizes 8.5x11 and 11x17.

5. NEW What is the current guidance for testing?
Please see COVID-19 Guidance for Community Providers (albertahealthservices.ca)

- PCR testing for Albertans is available only for those who have clinical risk factors for severe outcomes and those who live and work in high-risk settings effective immediately.
- Free rapid antigen test kits are available for at-home use.

6. UPDATED 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).

Post-COVID-19 Recovery

7. 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, a list of provider resources can be found here:

- **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:** The guideline provides:
  - Health professionals with consistent, evidence-based messaging for adults following a COVID-19 infection.
  - Answers to commonly asked questions.
  - Awareness for currently known nutrition-related post-COVID-19 side effects that may put adult patients at increased nutrition risk.
- As well, AHS has developed the resource **Long COVID-19 Symptoms of Health Concerns for Healthcare Providers FAQ**

8. **UPDATED** 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](#)
  - For patients discharged from the University of Alberta Hospital (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.
  - 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-19 follow up or Post-COVID-19 specialist evaluation.

**Calgary**
- Post- COVID-19 Pulmonary Clinic: [Peter Lougheed Centre](#)
  - Please refer patients through the Alberta Referral Directory
  - Referrals may be submitted in two ways.
    - Using Alberta Netcare, submit a request for a specialist appointment via eReferral Consult Request. For more information, see [https://www.albertanetcare.ca/ereferral.htm](https://www.albertanetcare.ca/ereferral.htm)
    - If you do not have Alberta Netcare, fax the completed referral form along with relevant documentation and clinic notes to Pulmonary Central Access and Triage.
- Post- COVID-19 Pulmonary Clinic: [Rockyview General Hospital](#)
  - Please refer patients through the Alberta Referral Directory.

9. **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.

As well patients may access these 24/7 phone supports:
• Health Link (811)
• Addiction and Mental Health Helpline (1-866-332-2322)

Patient Care

10. Are there pathways for community physicians to use when determining how to care for patients with suspected/confirmed or post COVID-19?
There are provincial 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 the provincial pathways:
• Adult COVID-19 Primary Care Pathway
• Pediatric COVID-19 Primary Care Pathway

11. 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.

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


13. 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.


14. 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.

15. 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. Patients receive the COVID-19: My Discharge Checklist before leaving the hospital. This guide will make it easier for patients and families to find answers to questions like what’s coming next, how to take care of yourself and who to contact for more information or support.

16. 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.”

17. Where can community primary care physicians go for specialist advice on caring for patients who are presumed or confirmed with COVID-19?
Please see COVID-19 Guidance for Community Providers.

18. What 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. There you will find the following information regarding pregnancy.

- COVID-19 and Pregnancy, Birth, Postpartum and Breastfeeding: Information for Expectant and New Parents
- COVID-19 Immunization in Pregnancy - What you need to know

As well, AHS has developed a position statement on Pregnant Healthcare Workers and COVID-19.

19. 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.

20. 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 for individuals with permanent addresses are no longer available after Aug 27. 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:** Masking is mandatory in all indoor public spaces, workplaces and places of worship. Alberta’s masking restrictions 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](#).

  Please see [CPSA guidelines and resources for physicians on masking and exemptions](#).

• **For vaccine exemption:** Please see [CPSA guidelines for physicians on vaccine and exemptions](#).

• **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.

21. UPDATED **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 and resources.
  • More information can be found here: [COVID-19 Guidance for Community Providers](#)
  • 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.
  • See below for billing information.

22. UPDATED **I’m a community physician and have provided virtual care. What billing code(s) should I use?**

  • In March 2020, 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 2020, 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 the [Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan Medical Service Bulletin Webpage](#) for their listings of the following:
    - Bulletin 252: Enhanced Virtual Care Codes
    - Bulletin 248: COVID-19 Vaccine Awareness Program
  • The Alberta Medical Association (AMA) also has more information on billing codes [here](#).
  • Review the [College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta guidance](#) on providing virtual care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

23. **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

24. UPDATED What should I recommend to patients regarding travel?
Since Dec. 15, 2021, the Public Health Agency of Canada has advised travellers, regardless of their vaccination status, to avoid non-essential travel outside of Canada. Travellers should be familiar with and follow all federal government requirements as outlined on the Government of Canada’s COVID-19 travel webpage. Fully-immunized travel exemptions have been put in place as of July 5; otherwise, international travelers must comply with the 14-day quarantine required by the Federal Quarantine Act. The federal government continues to recommend avoiding non-essential international travel.

If you are doing domestic travel in Canada, via plane or train you will need to be fully vaccinated in order to board.

25. 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

26. 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 troubleshooting.

27. UPDATED 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 daycare, 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 from December 21, 2020.

28. UPDATED 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 access the COVID-19 test results for children under the age of 18 through MyHealth Records. 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 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 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 or the hospital's clinical information system (e.g., 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 gonorrhoea (GC) nucleic acid testing in Alberta. These swabs are in short supply due to global demand. More information in this laboratory bulletin.

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.

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. 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. UPDATED Do patients who receive a positive result on an at-home rapid test or 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.

No, confirmatory PCR testing is not required unless patients meet specific eligibility criteria. People can use the COVID-19 Assessment & Testing Tool at ahs.ca/covidscreen to see if you are eligible to book a PCR test, and if you are, book an appointment.

If a person has symptoms of COVID-19, they must isolate right away, stay home and away from other people. Visit Rapid Testing at Home for instructions and next steps following a positive result on an at-home rapid test, and instructions provided at an AHS COVID-19 Assessment Centre or other community setting, for next steps following a rapid point of care test.