Billing Codes

1. I'm a community physician and have provided virtual care. What billing code(s) should I use? On March 23, Alberta Health announced new billing codes added to the Schedule of Medical Benefits. Community physicians providing virtual care are encouraged to use these codes to receive compensation. Review this bulletin to find more information.

Clinic Resources

2. Is there a limit to how many staff and patients we can have in the clinic at a time? Preventing the risk of transmission amongst staff, volunteers and patients remains important. CMOH Order 16-2020, page 9, provides examples of how to prevent the risk of transmission — including restricting the number of staff, volunteers and clients/patients in the setting at any one time as well as maintaining a two-meter separation between individuals. Review the order for more examples.

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) and AHS continue to recommend virtual care whenever possible.

3. Where can I find information on reopening of community based health services? Alberta’s Chief Medical Officer of Health has provided guidance on the relaunch of health services in this order dated May 3, CMOH Order 16-2020.

The CPSA is also a great resource that will address many of your questions during the resumption of services. The CPSA's Reopening Practice document highlights the importance of continued vigilance and safety during the relaunch period. The Alberta Medical Association has developed a checklist for community physicians to assess their clinic's readiness to relaunch.
4. Should we continue to have an identified isolation room?
Yes, during the COVID-19 pandemic isolation rooms should be used in the community setting for patients presenting with influenza-like illness (ILI). Please see Contact and Droplet Precautions for Isolation Rooms during COVID-19 for Community Physicians and Teams for more information.

5. Where can community physicians access language translation services?
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.

Language Line is a professional medical interpretation company contracted by AHS. Language Line provides language translation for over 240 languages and is available 24/7. There is a cost to using this service, so please see Language Line Interpretation Services for Community Physicians for more information.

6. Where can I find posters, signs and translated materials?
AHS.ca has launched a new page on their external website to help health professionals access current COVID-19 signage and posters. Many posters are available in multiple languages including Arabic, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, French, Punjabi, Spanish, Tigrinya, Vietnamese and Somali.

Community Physician Questions

7. NEW Is there guidance on patient masking in community care settings?
Yes, this Masking Guidance in Community Physician Settings provides guidance for community primary and specialty physician care settings to assist in masking decisions for patients and providers. It provides the following masking guidance for patients:

- **Procedure mask for patients with ILI symptoms or confirmed/suspect COVID-19):** Hand hygiene and procedure mask at entrance and wears for full visit
- **Mask (any type) for all patients and essential companions (without ILI symptoms or confirmed/suspect COVID-19):** Hand hygiene and mask at entrance and wears for full visit

This guidance is based on direction from the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Alberta Health Services. Providers should consider practice environment risk assessments, clinical judgement and professional association guidance in addition to this guidance.

8. UPDATED How can community physicians support COVID-19 patients after discharge from hospital?
Acute and primary care can work together to safely transition COVID-19 patients from home into hospital and back home. This Provincial Pandemic Flowsheet outlines how acute care can link to primary care providers to help keep patients well at home. This Transitions Checklist for Primary Care from the Alberta Medical Association outlines actions primary care teams can take to improve transitions. The Guideline for Monitoring and Managing COVID-19 Patients in Community provides more information and was designed to ensure integration and continuity of care for patients with presumed (probable or suspected) and confirmed COVID-19 who are being monitored and managed in their community, in an independent living environment. The guideline defines the roles and responsibilities of the patient, primary care providers, public health, acute care, and home living and supportive living.

9. What resources are available for community physician wellness during this time?

- **The Physician and Family Support Program** provides confidential support and help with personal health issues and enhances the quality of patient care and public safety by promoting health and well-being for the medical profession that cares for all Albertans. Call: 1-877-SOS-4MDS (767-4637) or go the Alberta Medical Association’s website here for more information.

- **Well Doc Alberta** provides short education bulletins with evidence-informed tips to support wellness during this time. Well Doc Alberta and the Alberta Medical Association’s Physician and Family Support...
Program (PFSP) have a multi-part joint podcast series focused on physician wellness. Throughout the series Dr. Jane Lemaire and Dr. Terri Brandon are joined by Fleur Yumol, a clinical social worker and the administrator of the PFSP’s 24-hour support line, to discuss strategies to promote physician wellness during the pandemic.

- **Canadian Medical Association (CMA) Physician Wellness Resources** has launched a new learning series to support physicians during the pandemic, on topics such as managing isolation, building resilience and moral distress.

- **Alberta Health Services** has infographics available that summarize topics such as supporting team members with COVID-19 related losses, focusing on what you can control and more.

10. Where can I get information on the resumption of healthcare services such as diagnostic imaging, ambulatory care or surgeries?

To ensure community primary care and specialty physicians are informed, plans to reopen services will be shared as they evolve. Community physicians should refer regularly to ahs.ca/covidPHC for up-to-date information. Community physicians can email phc@ahs.ca with any questions about the reopening of services.

11. I have been self-isolating and have questions about returning to work. Where can I go for information?

The COVID-19 Return to Work Guide for Community Physicians and Teams provides guidance on when to return to work following self-isolation, a COVID-19 test or symptoms. The guide is for primary care providers and specialists within the community setting as well as their teams.

A Health Link physician advice line is also available:

- South of Red Deer: 587-284-5302
- Red Deer and North: 780-910-0385

AHS physicians and staff should refer to the AHS Return to Work Guide.

12. Are community physicians still allowed to work at multiple sites during the pandemic?

Community physicians are not currently required to restrict their activities to a single site. Many physicians are required to work across multiple sites in the course of their day, by virtue of having call responsibilities at a zone level, scheduled specialized work at multiple sites or acting as a resource to multiple facilities – particularly in rural areas. For these reasons, community physicians are exempt from this restriction and are not currently required to restrict their activities to a single site. No community physicians should be providing care to patients if they have any new symptoms that may be consistent with an infectious disease.

All community physicians working at multiple sites are asked to observe specific measures during the COVID-19 response.

13. I work in a congregate living setting and we have a resident with ILI symptoms. Who can I call for help?

Residents who are feeling unwell and/or answer yes to any question on the COVID-19 Resident Questionnaire should be self-isolated in the facility (in their room or an available isolation room). AHS coordinated COVID-19 response must be contacted as soon as there is a person showing symptoms of COVID-19 for additional guidance and decision making support. The phone number for the COVID-19 Coordinated Response Line for Congregate Living Setting Operators is 1-844-343-0971.

14. I am a community physician and want to help. How can I put my name forward?

- AHS is maintaining a list of individuals with medical training who are willing and able to be redeployed as the COVID-19 response evolves.
  - Alberta licensed physicians: Licensed physicians and surgeons can register their availability by logging into the CPSA portal. Information gathered by the CPSA will be shared with AHS to guide redeployment planning.
15. I’m a community physician and am experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. Who do I contact with questions?
- If you’ve recently travelled or been exposed to COVID-19 (e.g., close contact to a patient who has tested positive with COVID-19 and been without appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) during the interaction), then you are legally required to self-isolate for a full 14 days.
- As a healthcare worker, you will be tested for COVID-19 if you have any of fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat or a runny nose. If you are experiencing symptoms please take the online assessment tool for Healthcare and Shelter Workers / Enforcement Personnel / First Responders. This will help you determine if you need to be tested for COVID-19 under the new requirements and how long you need to self-isolate if you may have been exposed or are experiencing symptoms.
- Health Link has set up two phone lines for community physicians to call with concerns about themselves.
  - It is critical these phone numbers be used by community physicians only and not members of the general public or physician family members. During this time of increased pressure on the health system, we are using these numbers to help ensure community physicians get the advice they need quickly.
    - South of Red Deer: 587-284-5302
    - Red Deer and North: 780-910-0385

16. 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.

17. How can community physicians and their teams ask questions related to their role in the COVID-19 response?
Community physicians and their teams can email PHC@ahs.ca for COVID-19 related questions.

**Infection, Prevention and Control (IPC)**

18. **UPDATED** How do community physicians order PPE and other supplies for COVID-19?
Community physicians have the option to procure Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and some cleaning supplies from Alberta Health Services (AHS) during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we move into a different phase of the pandemic response, AHS has moved to a cost-recovery model for distribution of PPE to community physicians not located in AHS-operated spaces.

To obtain PPE, PCN members will order through their PCN. Community physicians who are not members of PCNs will order directly through AHS. More information here:

- Ordering process for [PCNs and PCN member physicians](#)
- Ordering process for other [community physicians who are not members of PCNs](#) (non-PCN primary care physicians and community specialists)
- Current [AHS PPE price list](#)

AHS is just one option for community physicians to order PPE. They can also order PPE through the Government of Alberta’s [Provincial Operations Centre](#) until July 1, or they can source from any other supplier in the market.
Physicians working in AHS or contracted facilities who have questions regarding the PPE ordering process should contact their local CPSM Site Services Supervisor.

19. UPDATED I'm out of hand sanitizer and Cavi Wipes and cannot get any more. What should I use?
   • To clean environmental surfaces and medical equipment, use any disinfectant that has a Drug Identification Number (DIN) and a virucidal claim, or you can prepare a bleach water solution with 100 ml of unscented household bleach per 900 ml of water.
   • Soap and water can be used for hand washing (hand sanitizer is convenient but not required).
   • Community physicians have the option to procure PPE and some cleaning supplies from AHS during the COVID-19 pandemic.
   • Community physicians may order hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies through their PPE process. Available cleaning supplies for environmental cleaning include:
     o Vert-2-Go-Saber™ (one-litre, ready-to-use, disinfectant product) and disposable dry wipes

20. How can CPR be done in community settings without N95 masks?
CPR is considered an aerosol generating procedure; therefore, an N95 mask is required when using a bag valve mask.

Fit testing must be done every two years. If you are interested in fit testing for your staff, AHS recommends community physicians and their teams hire a private occupational health contractor to do the fit testing.

Alternatively, please visit the Heart and Stroke Foundation website for instructions for modified CPR chest compressions during the COVID-19 pandemic, when N95 masks are not available.

21. Is there a specific protocol we should use when cleaning exam rooms, equipment and garbage disposal?
   • Use any disinfectant that has a Drug Identification Number (DIN) and a virucidal claim, or you can prepare a bleach water solution with 100 ml of unscented household bleach per 900 ml of water to clean environmental surfaces and medical equipment.
   • Room surfaces and equipment cleaning/disinfection is required on a daily basis or more frequently.
   • High touch surfaces and areas where COVID-19 presumptive or positive patients are being cared for should be cleaned at least three times per day.
   • Pay particular attention to door knobs, light switches, staff rooms, desktops, washrooms and other high touch surfaces.
   • Dedicate patient equipment to a single patient. Clean and disinfect reusable patient equipment before use by another patient.
   • Consider assigning designated staff to complete enhanced environmental cleaning.
   • All cleaning activities should go from clean to dirty and from high to low areas.
   • Cleaning cloths and/or ready-to-use wipes should be changed and/or disposed of when the cloth and/or wipe is visibly soiled or is no longer wet enough to allow for appropriate contact time.
   • Please see the new Environmental Cleaning during COVID-19 in Community Clinics guide for more information.


22. Do I need to wear PPE my entire shift? Should I be wearing PPE continuously?
If you or your staff are unaccustomed to wearing PPE, consider doing this online module.

The AHS PPE Taskforce is advising all healthcare workers wear a surgical/procedural mask continuously, at all times and in all areas of the workplace if they:
   • Provide direct patient care
• Work in patient care areas in both AHS and community settings
• Cannot maintain adequate social distancing from patients or co-workers; or
• If entry into patient care areas is required

This approach reflects the emerging evidence of COVID-19 transmission, and related risks to patients and healthcare providers. This recommendation is based on emerging evidence that asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic or minimally symptomatic individuals can transmit COVID-19.

This change was made to protect patients from inadvertent exposure from a healthcare worker who could be without symptoms but still infectious. This will also minimize risk of an asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic healthcare worker exposing other healthcare workers to COVID-19 illness. Additional guidance about this approach is available on www.ahs.ca/covidppe.

As well as wearing a mask continuously, staff are reminded to continue using the following practices for every patient, every time:

1. Every patient interaction begins with a Point of Care Risk Assessment (PCRA). In turn, this directs appropriate measures to protect both healthcare workers and patients.
2. Having patients with respiratory symptoms wear a procedure mask is a source control strategy with strong evidence of reduction in viral shedding.
3. Contact and Droplet Precautions in addition to Routine Practices should be used for:
   a. All patients with Respiratory Symptoms or ILI
   b. Individuals where language barriers, altered mental status, severe illness or cognitive factors impact the accuracy of the PCRA
   c. Individuals who have been directed to self-isolate (e.g., travellers and contacts of probable or confirmed cases of COVID-19)
4. Use of a fit-tested N95 Respirator replaces a surgical/procedure mask for Aerosol-Generating Medical Procedures (AGMPs).

Appropriate and judicious use of all PPE, including surgical/procedure masks is critical to help conserve supplies and ensure availability through this COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information see:

- Masking Guidance in Community Physician Settings during COVID-19 Pandemic
- Guidelines for Continuous Masking in Home Care and Congregate Living Settings

Special Note: Effective and appropriate use of PPE keeps staff uniforms and clothing clean. Staff should change out of any soiled clothing before leaving the healthcare facility and take home in a plastic or washable bag. Soiled uniforms/clothing do not need any special handling in the laundry.

23. Do I need an N95 respirator when treating a patient with suspected or confirmed COVID-19?
When treating any patient including those with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, healthcare workers are reminded to wear a surgical/procedural mask continuously, unless performing an aerosol-generating medical procedure on a known, suspect or at risk (i.e., screening criteria positive) COVID-19 patient. Visit ahs.ca/covidPPE for more information on using PPE appropriately.

24. Do I have to wear scrubs when performing a task that requires PPE?
In alignment with the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) recommendations, normal clothing can be worn under PPE, unless scrubs are clinically necessary to your specialty; hair nets and scrubs are not required outside of surgical settings.
25. What about locations that don’t have hard walls to properly isolate symptomatic patients?
The World Health Organization (WHO) has reinforced that COVID-19 spreads by contact and droplet unless an aerosol-generating medical procedure is being done. Therefore, as long as proper contact and droplet precautions are followed, curtained areas are sufficient.

26. Are there videos or posters to demonstrate proper donning and doffing of PPE?
- Donning and Doffing demonstration video
- Donning poster
- Doffing poster

Testing

27. Has AHS or the Government of Alberta found a reliable method to test Albertans to determine if they have antibodies to COVID-19? I.e., Serology testing?
- Health Canada authorized the first COVID-19 serological test for use in Canada, the DiaSorin LIAISON®.
- There has been much work occurring right across the country to find a serological test (which tests for antibodies) that is safe, effective and can be scaled for use in testing the population.
- Health Canada approval of the first COVID-19 serological test is a positive step forward for Canada and for Alberta in our collective efforts to better understand this virus.
- Alberta Precision Laboratories (APL) is now in the final stages of evaluating and validating various serology tests, including the DiaSorin test. Even with Health Canada approval, APL must always independently validate any serological test before it is used in Alberta; other jurisdictions are doing similar independent evaluations.
- All this information will be used to inform which are the best tests to use.

28. What are the recommendations for COVID-19 specimen collection?
Nasopharyngeal (NP) swabs and NP aspirates remain the specimen source of choice for COVID-19 and respiratory pathogen panel (RPP) testing, recommended by Alberta Precision Laboratories (APL).

APL has developed an instructional resource for those who collect COVID-19 or other respiratory virus samples using throat swabs. The instruction sheet and short demonstration video show how to ensure samples collected on throat swabs are fully contained within saline transport tubes and properly sealed for safe transport to the lab. The throat swabs used for sample collection do not have a designed ‘break-point’. This can make detachment of the sample for transport a bit tricky. The video will show how you can cut or break off the swabs to ensure the swab is fully contained within the transport tube.

Additional information, including specimen collection type by setting and patient group can be found in this APL bulletin.

Please note, primary care clinics will not be receiving routine shipments to test for COVID-19. Swabs and transport media are being triaged to hospitals, congregate care facilities and COVID-19 assessment centres. See APL bulletin from more information.

29. Who can receive COVID-19 testing?
AHS continues to revise testing criteria in Alberta to reflect enhanced lab testing capacity and the evolving COVID-19 pandemic. This will continue to change in the coming days, weeks and months as the pandemic evolves. The Alberta Health website provides information on current testing criteria.

The following groups can use AHS’ online assessment tool to help determine whether they need to be referred for testing, if appropriate:
- Healthcare and Shelter Workers / Enforcement Personnel / First Responders
- Members of the public can continue to use the online assessment tool developed for them
30. Under what circumstances am I allowed to order lab work right now?
Alberta Precision Laboratories (APL) and DynaLIFE strongly recommend cessation of routine laboratory testing (as determined clinically) for stable community patients. Patients who require laboratory tests required for immediate management will be served and all testing ordered on the requisition will be performed. No patients will be denied service and all necessary specimens will be collected. Clinical judgment and prudent use of limited laboratory resources are the ordering provider’s responsibility. Please review this bulletin to learn more.

Action required:
- Discontinue ordering of routine and non-essential tests immediately, based on your clinical judgment.
- Limit all orders, including standing (recurring) orders, to those which are required for immediate patient management.

31. How do I get information on testing protocols, assessment centres and response?
Zone Emergency Operation Centres (ZEOCs) have now been established in each zone. Clinics should contact their PCNs for guidance on how the response is being organized in their zone. PCNs are communicating regularly with the ZEOCs.

32. How should COVID-19 swabs be transported?
COVID-19 specimens no longer need to be shipped according to Transportation of Dangerous Goods, Category B requirements. For additional concerns, contact the ProvLab Virologist on-call (VOC) to arrange appropriate shipping:
- Edmonton (780-407-8921)
- Calgary (403-333-4942)

33. 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 test results from across the province.

**Treatment and Patient Advice**

34. Where can community physicians find information about support-care services for patients during COVID-19?
COVID-19 Patient Resources: A guide for Albertans is a resource developed with patient advisors and AHS volunteers to assist community providers and their teams in finding links to supportive care services in the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guide provides basic information that can be shared with Albertans and their families and helps address the social determinants of health.

35. Where can I refer patients with rehabilitation needs who are having challenges accessing community supports during the COVID-19 pandemic?
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
- Have existing disabilities related to neurological conditions (e.g., Parkinson’s, Spinal Cord Injury, MS, Brain Injury, Stroke)
- 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

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.
36. 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 lines are now available for primary care providers in Alberta. Providers can phone for 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 and the number to call in your zone.

37. Can ibuprofen and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) be used to treat patients who have tested positive for COVID-19?
AHS has not changed its position on ibuprofen to address symptoms commonly associated with respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19. As per Health Canada’s information update released March 20, there is no scientific evidence that establishes a link between ibuprofen and the worsening of COVID-19 symptoms.

Guidance from Canadian sources and the European Medicines Agency state that patients who take prescribed NSAIDs prior to developing COVID-19 should continue to take their medication. Canadian, British and American sources have consistently suggested that acetaminophen should be used as the first-line treatment for fever. This is recommended out of an abundance of caution due to the absence of evidence regarding ibuprofen in COVID-19, but also because NSAIDs carry a risk of acute kidney injury in people who are sick.

For more information, see the Rapid Review.

38. 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.

39. What resources are available to patients who need non-medical support?
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.”

40. What advice can I give patients about physical distancing?
Refer patients to the Alberta Health fact sheet, or encourage them to watch AHS’ video which explains the concept of physical distancing and outlines how it can help prevent the spread of the virus.

Physical distancing taking steps to limit the number of people you come into close contact with. It can help you reduce the risk of getting sick. This is not the same as self-isolation. You do not need to remain indoors, but you do need to avoid being in close contact with people.

- To protect yourself and others:
  - Keep at least 6 feet from others when going out for groceries, medical trips/other essential needs
  - As a reminder, all healthcare workers are advised to wear a surgical/procedural mask continuously, at all times and in all areas of the workplace if they:
    - Provide direct patient care
    - Work in patient care areas in both AHS and community settings
    - Cannot maintain adequate social distancing from patients or co-workers; or
    - If entry into patient care areas is required
  - Limit the number of times you leave your home for errands
  - Try to shop at less busy times or order online to have groceries or other items delivered
  - Go for a walk in your neighborhood or park while maintaining distance from others
  - Avoid overcrowding in elevators or other enclosed spaces
  - Follow Alberta’s recommendations on mass gatherings
  - Wash or sanitize your hands after touching communal surfaces

41. Where do I find the latest self-isolation guidelines?
You can find the latest self-isolation information from Alberta Health.
42. Where can I find guidance on the management of confirmed, suspect or persons under investigation of COVID-19?
You can use the Alberta Public Health Disease Management Guidelines for COVID-19 for guidance.

43. What should I recommend to patients regarding travel?
- An official global travel advisory is in effect.
  - Avoid non-essential travel outside Canada and all cruise ship travel
  - Canadians abroad should return home as soon as possible. Financial help to return may be available from the Government of Canada.
- All travellers returning from outside Canada are:
  - Legally required to self-isolate for 14 days, and
  - Monitor for symptoms: cough, fever, shortness of breath, nasal congestion or sore throat
  - If you become sick during this time, you must self-isolate for at least 10 additional days from all other members of your household from the beginning of symptoms or until you are feeling well, whichever takes longer.

**Virtual Care**

44. Can we continue to use virtual billing codes; until when and for which patients?
CPA and AHS continue to recommend virtual care whenever possible. Currently, there is no end date. Please refer to this Alberta Government Bulletin.

CPSA has a guide for determining “Urgent” patients.

45. What resources are available to help me provide virtual care to my patients?
There are telephone options to support continuity of care for your patients, as appropriate.
- 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.