



Date: October 9, 2020
To: Community Physicians
From: Dr. Carolyn O'Hara, Interim Chief Medical Laboratory Officer, APL
RE: Addressing Delays in Laboratory Services

Summary & Key Messages:

- COVID-19 has dramatically influenced all aspects of healthcare delivery and has changed the way in which we deliver care. APL, AHS and DynaLife are aware of concerns about wait times for lab tests as a result of COVID-19.
- We are actively looking to new ways to reduce delays and return to pre-pandemic capacity for regular lab testing.
- Physicians can assist by advising patients that there may be delays in accessing testing, by focusing on appropriate usage of lab services and by reducing testing where it won't influence care or decision-making.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Alberta Precision Laboratories (APL) has made every effort to ensure patients who require lab work continue to receive it in a timely fashion based on their clinical requirements. We continue to work with Alberta Health Services and with physicians across the province to find innovative solutions to return to pre-pandemic capacity and to better prioritize those in the greatest need of urgent bloodwork and other testing.

Our Outpatient Labs and Patient Service Centers (PSCs) continue to struggle to accommodate current patient volumes due to difficulties maintaining staffing levels. Additionally, there is a backlog of patients resulting from the closure of some of PSCs and the plea to physicians to limit routine testing at the beginning of the pandemic. As we face the winter months and colder weather, we are anticipating the pressures on our Outpatient Labs and PSCs will increase. Some of the steps we are taking to reduce wait times and enhance access across the province include:

- Reopening all PSCs that were closed during COVID lock-down.
- Hiring additional staff to support patient screening and line management at PSCs.
- Expanding hours and adding appointment spaces at PSC sites with the goal of next available appointment to be at the pre-pandemic level of 2-3 weeks.
- Protecting available appointments for higher acuity patients, (ie, cancer patients, requiring immediate lab work for treatment).
- Leasing additional waiting room space in or near PSC locations to provide comfortable waiting spaces away from the elements.
- In the Edmonton region, our lab provider DynaLife has added staff, extended hours and expanded indoor waiting space at their facilities. DynaLife is offering walk-in appointments at all of their sites and has also launched a Save My Place mobile app that allowed patients to get in line from home and updates them on estimated time of service at the lab.



How can physicians help?

Effective utilization of laboratory resources is always important, but now more than ever we need to focus our resources on the patients in greatest need of timely access to lab testing. To that end, we are asking for your collaboration to ensure appropriate usage of lab services by using your best clinical judgement to reduce the potential for ordering unnecessary or inappropriate tests.

Numerous academic studies have found there is a compelling quality improvement opportunity for Alberta physicians to optimize the use of laboratory testing. Approximately 35% of all lab testing has been found to be low value given the patient's condition – which can be associated with investigational cascades and increased patient harm.

A valuable resource is the guidelines that cover lab testing provided by **Choosing Wisely Canada**. Recommendations that you should consider when ordering routine lab testing can be found in their Family Medicine specialty: <https://choosingwiselycanada.org/family-medicine/> as well as their broader recommendations for each specialty area: <https://choosingwiselycanada.org/recommendations/>

Another helpful resource is the **Health Quality Council of Alberta's 2020 Primary Healthcare Panel Report**, which for the first time gives family physicians access to their lab utilization patterns to see how they compare with colleagues. This tool also provides expert suggestions to improve lab testing appropriateness and identifies opportunities for improvement. To access the physician audit and feedback tool, physicians or their delegates must request a "2020 Primary Healthcare Panel Report" by visiting the HQCA website: <https://request.hqca.ca/>

We know that Albertans' experiences when they visit the lab are different now than before the pandemic, and we recognize that can be unsettling for some lab clients. The new processes in place are essential to protecting our clients and our staff, as we manage patient flow in a way to help limit the potential spread of COVID-19.

As much as possible, patients are encouraged to book appointments for lab work at www.albertaprecisionlabs.ca. Because the wait time when booking test appointments online is longer than we would like, many labs provide same-day service for walk-in patients. Walk-in patients who are unable to be immediately accommodated in the laboratory waiting area can choose to be notified by cellphone if they prefer to wait in an alternate location (such as in a vehicle or a nearby indoor space). Lab staff are making preparations for the arrival of cooler weather, including the addition of more indoor waiting areas where possible at some locations.

Patients who are unable to walk in to our lab sites and require urgent testing should phone the province-wide **Patient Appointment Line: 1-877-868-6848** for assistance with short-notice bookings and to be directed to dedicated collection facilities for immunocompromised patients.

Our top priority remains protecting the health of Albertans as we continue to provide safe, efficient lab services across the province. We appreciate your patience and ongoing collaboration to address the challenges we are all facing.