

Ministry of Health

COVID-19 Guidance: Primary Care Providers in a Community Setting

Version 5 – May 22, 2020

Highlights of changes

- Expanded guidance for [in-person care for essential visits](#)
- Expanded guidance on [testing and specimen collection](#), including hyperlinks to [COVID-19 virus test requisition](#) and [assessment centre locator](#)
- Additional details on [occupational health and safety](#), including summary of required personal protective equipment (PPE) precautions, and infection prevention and control guidance
- List and hyperlinks to [key resources](#)

This guidance provides basic information only. It is not intended to take the place of medical advice, diagnosis, treatment, or legal advice. In the event of a conflict between this Guidance and a Directive of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, the Directive prevails.

- Please check the [Ministry of Health \(MOH\) COVID-19 website](#) regularly for updated versions of this document, the case definition, testing guidance, mental health resources, and other COVID-19 related information.
- The latest version of the [COVID-19 Reference Document for Symptoms](#) and [COVID-19 Patient Screening Guidance Document](#) are available and updated on the [MOH COVID-19 website](#).
- Please check the [Directives, Memorandums and Other Resources](#) page regularly for the most up to date directives.

General

Virtual Care

1. All primary care providers are encouraged to continue to implement a system for virtual and/or telephone consultations as a preferred option, when and where possible.
2. When possible, primary care providers should conduct a consultation over the phone, video or secure messaging to determine if a virtual/telephone consultation will suffice or if an in-person appointment is necessary and essential. The purpose of this is to support physical distancing and minimize contact of persons who may have COVID-19 with health care settings.
3. All primary care providers should continue to be available for medication renewals (office coverage, phone/fax, communication with local pharmacies, etc.), including for those patients on controlled substance regimes or opioid agonists who will need their measured renewals by their main prescriber (in most cases their family doctor) and should not be forced to seek controlled substance renewal elsewhere.

In-Person Care for Essential Visits

4. Certain patients or acute conditions will require in-person visits. This includes vaccine administration for infants and children. Some helpful 'In-Person Considerations' related to in-person visits are available under the Ontario College of Family Physicians (OCFP)'s [COVID-19 Tips for Family Doctors](#). Primary care providers should exercise clinical judgement to determine whether an in-person visit is necessary.
5. Primary care providers should consider providing some care virtually even if an in-person visit is needed in order to minimize the in-person time required (i.e., an essential prenatal visit could be divided into a virtual discussion of testing/screening options with a brief in person physical assessment).
6. Primary care providers should ensure that there is enough space to follow physical distancing guidelines of maintaining at least 2 meters from other people. This includes the following:

- Minimize the need for patients to wait in the waiting room (e.g. spreading out appointments, having each patient stay outside the clinic until the examination room is ready for them and then call in, by phone preferably).
- Space out chairs in the waiting room to allow for physical distancing
- Ensure that patients do not leave their masks in waiting areas.
- Consider ways to minimize traffic flow for common spaces (e.g. physical markings in hallways, limiting the number of people in an elevator, etc.)
- Reduce the number of examination rooms being used.
- Minimize staff in the office/clinic. Consider what tasks can be done from home or outside of regular hours to minimize staff interactions with each other and patients.
- Minimize the number of individuals in the office/clinic at one time. For example, limit the number of non-essential individuals that may accompany a patient for their appointment (excluding minors and support persons).

Screening

7. Primary care providers should post information on their clinic website or send an email to all patients advising them to call prior to coming to the office/clinic where applicable.
8. If an in-person visit is necessary and feasible, the primary care setting should undertake active and passive screening as defined below.
9. If an in-person visit is offered, patients should be advised to wear their own mask (cloth or other) to the office/clinic if they have one available to them.

Active Screening

- Patients should be screened over the phone for symptoms of COVID-19 before scheduling appointments.
- Where patients present in-person without phone screening, staff should screen patients (and those accompanying them, if applicable) upon entry to assess for symptoms and exposure history.
- Staff conducting screening on site should ideally be behind a barrier to protect from droplet and contact spread. A plexiglass barrier can protect reception staff from sneezing/coughing patients. If a plexiglass barrier is not available,

staff should maintain a 2-metre distance from the patient. If the office is unable to provide this physical barrier for those screening, the health care worker (HCW) doing the screening should use Droplet and Contact precautions. This includes the following PPE – gloves, isolation gown, a surgical/procedure mask, and eye protection (goggles or face shield).

- The latest [COVID-19 Patient Screening Guidance Document](#) on the [MOH COVID-19 website](#) should be used and may be adapted as needed and appropriate for screening purposes. Note that the case definition is primarily for public health surveillance.
- For reference, a full list of common COVID-19 symptoms is available in the [COVID-19 Reference Document for Symptoms](#) on the [MOH COVID-19 website](#). Atypical symptoms and signs of COVID-19 are also available on this document and should be considered, particularly in children, older persons, and people living with a developmental disability.

Passive Screening

- Signage should be posted at the entrance to the office/clinic and at reception areas requesting patients with symptoms to put on a surgical/procedure mask (if available and if tolerated), perform hand hygiene and then to report to reception to self-identify. Sample signage is available on the [MOH COVID-19 website](#) (scroll to the bottom of the page). If the office/clinic is in a shared building, signage should also be posted at the entrance to the building.
- Where possible, primary care providers should have signage outside the office/clinic asking patients to call the clinic before entering to allow for appropriate screening and direction.

Positive Screening: What to do

Positive screening over the phone

10. A patient who screens positive for symptoms of COVID-19 over the phone should be offered a telephone consultation with a primary care provider ideally on the same day. Patients with severe symptoms should be directed to the emergency department. Otherwise, patients should be instructed to [self-isolate](#) until further discussion with their primary care provider. This discussion should include a thorough history-taking and assessment of symptoms and managing them, even if COVID-19 testing is being considered as part of the

diagnostic plan. COVID-19 testing should be offered to all patients with compatible symptoms where possible.

11. Based on the telephone consultation:

- If testing is needed, refer the patient to a local testing location or emergency department as appropriate for where testing is offered in your community.
 - a. Primary care providers should be familiar with local testing locations (e.g., emergency departments, drive-thru testing centres, and/or [assessment centres](#)) and their specific protocols. Assessment centres should accept all symptomatic patients referred for testing by a primary care provider.
 - b. Patients should be instructed to [self-isolate](#) immediately and until test results are received and further instructions are provided by the primary care provider.
- If resources limit the ability to test, patients should be advised to self-isolate for 14 days following symptom onset. Patients can be advised to discontinue isolation at 14 days after symptom onset, provided that the individual is afebrile and symptoms are improving. Absence of cough is not required for those known to have chronic cough or who are experiencing reactive airways post-infection.

Positive screening in the office/clinic

- 12.** Patients who screen positive should be given a surgical/procedure mask and be advised to perform hand hygiene. Ensure patients do not leave their masks in waiting areas. As soon as the reception staff is aware that a patient screens positive, the patient should be immediately placed in a room with the door closed (do not cohort with other patients), where possible, to avoid contact with other patients in common areas of the office/clinic (e.g., waiting rooms). If it is not possible to move a patient from the waiting room to an available exam room, the patient can be instructed to return outside (e.g. vehicle or parking lot, if available and appropriate) and informed that they will be texted or called when a room becomes available.
- 13.** Patients should be provided with hand sanitizer (if available), access to tissue and a hands-free waste receptacle for their used tissues and used masks. All patients should be instructed to cover their nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing and sneezing, dispose of the tissue in the receptacle and to use the

hand sanitizer right afterwards. Patients may also be instructed to take their surgical/procedure mask home with them with instructions for doffing masks. A sample patient handout on wearing and disposing of masks is available on the OCFP's [Clinical Care - Office Readiness](#) page.

14. Primary care providers may offer clinical assessment and examination to patients who screen positive **only if** they are able to follow Droplet and Contact precautions and are knowledgeable on how to properly don and doff PPE. This includes the following PPE: gloves, isolation gown, a surgical/procedure mask, and eye protection (goggles or face shield).
15. If primary care providers are not able to follow Droplet and Contact precautions and/or are not knowledgeable on how to properly don and doff PPE, they should divert the care of the patient as appropriate. This includes: to the emergency department, for testing and patient care, if the reason for the medical visit is urgent; or to an assessment centre, for testing, if the medical reason for the medical visit can be deferred.

Testing for COVID-19

Testing Guidance

16. Testing should be offered to all patients with compatible symptoms where possible. The exception being runny nose or nasal congestion related to an underlying condition such as seasonal allergies or post-nasal drip. Primary care providers should reference the [COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance Update](#) for guidance on assessing and managing patients considered to be at higher risk.
17. Primary care providers should be familiar with local testing locations (e.g., emergency departments, drive-thru testing centres, and/or [assessment centres](#)) and their specific protocols. Assessment centres should accept all symptomatic patients referred for testing by a primary care provider. Testing options are outlined below.
 - **Referral to the nearest emergency department or testing location:** Primary care providers should follow their local testing location's protocol about referrals for testing; or
 - **Testing in the primary care office/clinic:** Can be performed **only if** the primary care provider is able to follow Droplet and Contact precautions as outlined above, has the appropriate tools and knowledge of how to test,

and can ensure coordination of sample delivery to a laboratory providing COVID-19 testing.

18. If patients are referred to a hospital or a testing location, the primary care provider should make efforts to ensure that the patient has safe arrangements for travel to the hospital or testing location that maintains isolation of the patient (i.e., patient should wear a surgical/procedure mask and should not take public transit). Primary care providers should follow their local testing location's protocol about referrals for testing.

Clearing Cases

19. For guidance regarding diagnosing and managing cases in primary care, including discontinuing isolation and returning to work, primary care providers should consult the [COVID-19 Quick Reference Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance](#) on the [MOH COVID-19 website](#). This document also outlines the recommended approaches for HCWs who are returning to work after symptom resolution and/or COVID-19 testing.

Specimen Collection, Handling, and Submission

- Specimens should be sent to a [PHO Laboratory](#), or another suitable laboratory with testing capacity.
- A suspect COVID-19 case should be tested by collecting a single upper respiratory tract specimen. Upper respiratory tract specimens include a nasopharyngeal (NP) swab, deep nasal swab, anterior nasal swab, or a viral throat swab. When appropriate swabs are available, NP swabs are the preferred specimen, followed by a deep nasal swab.
- NP swab collection is not considered an aerosol-generating procedure (AGMP) and therefore can be performed using Droplet and Contact precautions (i.e., gloves, isolation gown, surgical/procedure mask, and eye protection). This is important as many people will cough or sneeze when the NP swab is done. Links to resources on properly conducting NP swabs are available under 'In-Person Care' on OCFP's [Clinical Care - Office Readiness](#) page.
- Specimens must be placed in the specimen bag with the fully completed [COVID-19 virus test requisition](#) placed in the attached pouch, so it is not exposed to the specimen. It is recommended that the swab is pre-labelled so that it can simply be dropped into the bag without further handling once the swab is obtained.

Reporting of COVID-19 Cases

20. COVID-19 is a designated disease of public health significance (O. Reg. 135/18) and thus reportable under the [Health Protection and Promotion Act](#).
21. Regulated health professionals should contact their [local public health unit](#) to report any probable and confirmed cases of COVID-19

Occupational Health & Safety

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

22. Summary of required HCW precautions are displayed in the table below

| Activity | HCW Precautions |
|--|--|
| Before every patient interaction | HCW must conduct a point-of-care risk assessment to determine the level of precautions required |
| All interactions with and within 2 metres of patients who screen positive | Droplet and Contact precautions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surgical/procedure mask • Isolation gown • Gloves • Eye protection (goggles or face shield) • Perform hand hygiene before and after contact with the patient and the patient environment and after the removal of PPE |

| Activity | HCW Precautions |
|--|--|
| All interactions with and within 2 metres of patients who screen negative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surgical/procedure mask required • Use of eye protection (goggles or a face shield) should be considered • Perform hand hygiene before and after contact with the patient and the patient environment and after the removal of PPE |

- 23.** HCW precautions should take into consideration both COVID-19 and other potential communicable diseases as part of the point-of-care risk assessment. For patients who screen negative and coming to the office/clinic for vaccine administration, gloves should be worn in addition to a surgical/procedure mask with consideration for eye protection, as above.
- 24.** Given community spread of COVID-19 within Ontario and evidence that transmission may occur from those who have few or no symptoms, masking (surgical/procedure mask) for the full duration of shifts for HCWs working in direct patient care areas is recommended. Masking is also recommended for HCWs working outside of direct patient care areas when interacting with other HCWs and physical distancing cannot be maintained. The rationale for full-shift masking is to reduce the risk of transmitting COVID-19 infection from HCW to patients or other office/clinic HCWs, at a time when no signs or symptoms of illness are recognized, but the virus can be transmitted. This is a form of source control.
- 25.** The use of eye protection (e.g., goggles or a face shield) for the duration of a shift should be strongly considered in order to protect HCWs when there is COVID-19 infection occurring in the community.
- 26.** Primary care providers should be knowledgeable on the proper sequence of donning and doffing PPE. A visual factsheet for [Putting on and taking off PPE](#) is available on [PHO's website](#). Videos are also available on [PHO's website](#).

Infection Prevention and Control

- 27.** Primary care settings should have measures and procedures for worker safety including measures and procedures for infection prevention and control (IPAC).

28. Online learning on IPAC is available on [PHO's website](#).
29. All staff in the office/clinic should [self-monitor](#) for COVID-19 symptoms at home and not come to work if feeling ill. Primary care providers should ensure that all staff who work in their settings are aware of the [symptoms of COVID-19](#) and are instructed to remain at home, or return home from work, if symptoms develop. The [COVID-19 Quick Reference Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance](#) has specific guidance on how to ensure a safe return to work for HCWs.
30. Primary care providers who are asymptomatic and have returned from travel outside of the province, in the last 14 days and/or have had unprotected exposure to a person with COVID-19 and have been identified critical to operations in their organization, should refer to the [How to Self-isolate while Working fact sheet](#) and the [Quick Reference Sheet Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance](#) available on the [MOH COVID-19 website](#).
31. After every patient visit, whether the patient is symptomatic or not, patient-contact surfaces (i.e., areas within 2 metres of the patient) should be disinfected as soon as possible. Treatment areas, including all horizontal surfaces, and any equipment used on the patient (e.g., exam table, thermometer, BP cuff) should be cleaned and disinfected before another patient is brought into the treatment area or used on another patient. Refer to PIDAC's [Best Practices for Environmental Cleaning for Prevention and Control in All Health Care Settings](#) for more information about environmental cleaning. Additional resources and overviews are available under 'Office Readiness' on OCFP's [Clinical Care - Office Readiness](#) page.
32. Plexiglass barriers are to be included in routine cleaning (e.g. daily) using a cleaning product that will not affect the integrity or function of the barrier.
33. Non-essential items are recommended to be removed from patient care areas to minimize the potential for these to be contaminated and become a potential vehicle for transmission (e.g., magazines and toys).
34. If a patient or staff member was in the office/clinic and later tests positive for COVID-19, primary care providers, if aware, are encouraged to call their [local](#)

[public health unit](#) for advice on their potential exposure and implications for continuation of work.

Key Resources

- [IPAC Recommendations for Use of PPE for Care of Individuals with Suspect or Confirmed COVID-19 \(PHO\)](#)
- [Infection Prevention and Control Fundamentals \(PHO\)](#)
- [Best Practices for Environmental Cleaning for Prevention and Control in All Health Care Settings \(PHO\)](#)
- [Droplet and Contact Precautions for Non-Acute Care Facilities \(PHO\)](#)
- [Recommended Steps for Taking Off PPE \(PHO\)](#)
- [Aerosol Generation from Coughs and Sneezes \(PHO\)](#)
- [How to Self-Monitor \(PHO\)](#)
- [How to Self-Isolate \(PHO\)](#)
- [How to Self-Isolate When Working \(PHO\)](#)
- [How to Wash Your Hands \(PHO\)](#)
- [Infection Prevention and Control – Online Learning \(PHO\)](#)
- [COVID-19: Clinical and Practical Guidance for Primary Care Providers \(CEP\)](#)
- [Maintaining Regular Primary Care Practice in the COVID-19 Context \(CEP\)](#)