Ontario Health

Memo

Date:
October 13, 2023

To: Primary care clinicians and administrators

From: Dr. Elizabeth Muggah, Senior Clinical Advisor, Primary Care

CC: Dr. Sacha Bhatia, Senior Vice President, Population Health and Value-Based Health Systems
Zahra Ismail, Vice President, Primary Care and Person-Centred Measurement
Dr. Chris Simpson, Chief Medical Officer and Executive Vice President
Anna Greenberg, Chief Regional Officer, Toronto and East
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Brian Ktytor, Chief Regional Officer, North East and North West

Re: Supports for the Fall/Winter Respiratory Illness Season

Dear colleagues,

Thank you for your ongoing dedication to support your patients. The volume of visits to primary care has recovered and is back at pre-pandemic levels, with primary care seeing a balance of 80% of their patients in person and 20% virtually. We recognize and extend our gratitude for your efforts.

As we move into fall, we have already noted an increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations and anticipate that rates of other respiratory illnesses, including influenza and RSV, will also increase. This will mean more visits to primary care practices as well as emergency departments for cough and fever. As you continue to balance multiple ongoing clinical demands this fall, we value the critical role you play in the prevention and care of patients with febrile respiratory illness through vaccination, assessment, and treatment.

The following is a summary of updates and guidance to support your efforts to respond to your patients and communities' needs. For convenience, the areas of support have been organized into the following sections that can be accessed through the following (CTRL + click) links:

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Thank you for your ongoing dedication to care for your patients during this time. We will continue to send updates as new and/or updated information emerges.

Fall Response Planning Resources

Caring for Patients with COVID-19 and Other Febrile Respiratory Infections

- **Patient-facing communications and care** will continue to reinforce trusted clinical relationships; many patients will want to see you, particularly parents and caregivers of young children. Please ensure continued communication with your patients and share information on your availability, including after-hours services. Please see this Ministry of Health Patient Resource Site and the Ontario College of Family Physicians' patient information webpage for more patient-facing resources.

- **Office readiness and Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) resources** from the following organizations have been updated for this fall season:
    - The Ontario College of Family Physicians' IPAC guidance for community practices and respiratory illness season tools and resources
    - The Ontario Medical Association's Guide to Safely Providing In Person Care for Community-Based Practices (gated link available only to physicians)
    - Centre for Effective Practice's COVID-19 in 2023: Care and Operations Guidance.

- There have been no recent changes to Public Health Ontario's recommendations on the use of masks in primary care settings.
    - Decisions should continue to be based on **risk assessments** reflecting respiratory virus activity, the patient population, as well as the clinical setting and activities. For guidance on masking in high-risk and non-high-risk period settings, see Table 2 of this Public Health Ontario guidance.
    - As co-circulation of COVID-19, influenza and RSV rises in the community, it is reasonable to begin masking in all clinical settings. Please see the Ontario Respiratory Virus Tool for more information on the levels of circulating respiratory viruses across the province.
    - We will keep you updated if there are changes to this recommendation.

- **Personal protective equipment (PPE)** and other critical supplies and equipment, including rapid antigen tests, continue to be available through the Provincial PPE Supply Portal. New users should visit the Registration for Provincial PPE Supply Portal.

- **Ontario Health Clinical Services – Health811 and Regional Virtual Urgent Care Programs**
    - For non-urgent health inquiries and questions including those regarding respiratory illnesses, Ontarians can access **Health811** 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling 811 (TTY: 1-866-797-0007) or by visiting health811.ontario.ca to chat live online. Through this service, Ontarians can get free health advice from a registered nurse, find local health services including virtual urgent care, check their symptoms online and browse trusted health information.
    - **Regional virtual urgent care programs** offering coverage by nurse practitioners are available for those without a primary care clinician or for those unable to reach their clinician through the following regional locations (please check websites for hours and availability)**:**
        - Central Region (Adult and Pediatric) - Oak Valley Health
        - Toronto Region (Adult) - Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre/University Health Network
        - Toronto Region (Pediatrics) - SickKids
        - Toronto Region (Mental Health) - Centre for Addictions and Mental Health
        - East Region (Adult and Pediatrics) - Durham Community Health Centre
        - West Region (Adult) - St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton
        - West Region (Pediatrics) - London Health Sciences Centre

COVID-19, RSV and Influenza Vaccination

- **COVID-19 vaccination for those six months or older continues to be a priority.** This Ministry of Health guidance provides COVID-19 vaccination recommendations.
    - Seasonal doses of an **updated XBB vaccine** are recommended for **everyone six months of age or older** and particularly those at high risk**.** Doses are recommended at an interval of six months after either the last COVID-19 infection or last COVID-19 vaccination and can be safety co-administered with the flu vaccine. See The Centre for Effective Practice's updated COVID-19 Vaccines 2023 guidance.
    - Health Canada has approved the updated Moderna and Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for the XBB variant for those aged six months and older; approval of the updated Novavax XBB COVID-19 vaccines will follow.
    - COVID-19 vaccination distribution with the updated vaccine has started for those at highest risk (i.e., in hospital or long-term care) and will then be made available in the community first for those at higher risk (including health care workers); with access to the general population expected to start October 30.
    - Patients can book a COVID-19 vaccine at selected pharmacies or local public health unit community clinics via the Ministry of Health website or by calling the Provincial Vaccine Contact Centre at 1-833-943-3900 (TTY: 1-866-797-0007 toll free) from Monday to Friday (excluding holidays) from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.
    - Primary care clinicians who wish to access COVID-19 vaccines for their patients should contact their local public health units. Note that documentation into COVaxON is still required.
    - The Ministry of Health has created a summary of patient-facing COVID-19 vaccination information resources including information on the COVID-19 vaccination booking portal.

- **Influenza vaccination** is recommended this fall for those six months and older and particularly for those in the highest risk groups; the vaccine can be safely co-administered with the COVID-19 vaccine. Access for those at highest risk has begun with availability to the general population planned for October 30 as part of the 2023/2024 Ontario Universal Influenza Program.

- **RSV vaccination (Arexvy)** will be available and **publicly funded** for those who are **60 years and older and at highest risk** (i.e., living in long-term care homes or Elder Care Lodges and for some retirement home residents).
    - In the community setting, the vaccine is now available for private purchase at select pharmacies and requires a prescription from a physician or nurse practitioner; currently this vaccine cannot be administered by a pharmacist.
    - RSV vaccination is indicated for those who are **60 years and older and at high risk** of severe respiratory syncytial virus disease. For factors associated with increased risk for severe RSV disease, see this guidance from the Centre for Disease Control.
    - As a precaution, it is recommended that the RSV vaccine be administered at least 14 days before or after the administration of a COVID-19 or influenza vaccine. Please refer to Public Health Ontario's recommendations regarding the co-administration of RSV, COVID-19 and influenza vaccine.

COVID-19 Testing

- Patients at high risk of severe outcomes of COVID-19 are eligible for PCR or rapid molecular testing at provincial testing locations.
- Ordering publicly funded **PCR testing** for use in office can be done using the Public Health Ontario COVID-19 and Respiratory Virus Test Requisition form. For help filling out the form, use these instructions.

- Primary care clinicians may enrol in the Provincial Antigen Screening Program (PASP) via the Ontario Together Portal to order **rapid antigen tests** through the PPE Supply Portal for distribution to patients and staff.
    - Providers already enrolled in PASP can proceed directly with ordering rapid antigen tests via the PPE Supply Portal, including accessing an existing account or asking questions about orders and shipment, by contacting sco.supplies@ontario.ca.

- Additionally, patients can access rapid antigen tests through local public health units, pharmacies and other health care providers (including physiotherapists, dentists, allied health professionals, etc.) who choose to distribute.

- High-Priority Communities, First Nations/Indigenous Communities and select eligible sectors (congregate settings and the broader public sector) continue to have access to free rapid antigen tests via existing channels.

- For helpful summary information on **COVID-19 testing and antiviral treatments**, see this September 18, 2023 Ministry of Health Infobulletin.

COVID-19 Treatment

Antiviral treatments should be strongly considered for individuals with mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms who have a positive PCR, rapid molecular or rapid antigen test and who are at high risk of severe outcomes. Continue to communicate in advance with your high-risk patients about a plan to access antiviral treatment within the therapeutic window, if eligible, should they test positive.

- Ontario Health has released updated guidance for accessing antiviral treatments for COVID-19 in the community.

- **Nirmatrelvir/ritonavir (Paxlovid™)** continues to be recommended as the preferred first-line therapy when safe and feasible for those at high risk of severe COVID-19 who are within five days of symptom onset.
    - Physicians, nurse practitioners and participating pharmacists can prescribe Paxlovid.
    - Ontario Health's website has resources for health care providers on the use of COVID-19 antiviral treatments, including a Paxlovid handout for patients available in 29 languages.
    - The Ministry of Health's COVID-19 antiviral screener tool can help patients determine if they are at high risk and should be assessed for antiviral treatment.

- **Remdesivir (Veklury®)** is recommended for eligible patients at high risk of severe COVID-19 who cannot take Paxlovid due to medical contraindication or significant drug interactions or who are beyond the five-day treatment window for Paxlovid.
    - Referrals can be made through Home and Community Care Support Services (HCCSS) to access a remdesivir infusion site. Prescribers must complete a referral/prescription form along with the IV referral form and submit them to their local HCCSS and a care coordinator will follow up with the patient.
    - Physicians and nurse practitioners can prescribe remdesivir.
    - For more information, see Ontario Health's Recommendations for Outpatient Use of Intravenous Remdesivir (Veklury) in Adults.

Information on Post-COVID-19 Condition (i.e., Long COVID)

- Ontario Health has developed clinical guidance to help primary care providers assess, manage and refer patients who may have post-COVID-19 condition.

- The ministry has launched a post-COVID-19 condition diagnostic code to provide data and improve the health care services provided to individuals with the condition. The Centre for Effective Practice also maintains a resource page on post-COVID-19 condition with the latest evidence.

RSV Prophylaxis and Influenza Testing and Treatment

- The RSV Prophylaxis for High-Risk Infants Program through the Ministry of Health covers the cost of palivizumab to prevent a serious lower respiratory tract infection caused by RSV in infants <2 years of age at the start of the RSV season who are high risk for RSV disease. Please visit the program website for details including eligibility and enrolment forms.

- Influenza testing will likely continue to be unavailable to primary care providers in the community setting. For information on testing in hospital and long-term care settings, see the Public Health Ontario test information index on respiratory viruses (including influenza).

- For up-to-date information on influenza antivirals (e.g., Tamiflu), visit the Public Health Ontario webpage on influenza.

Regional Support for Primary Care

Ontario Health regions continue to provide support and partnerships to system partners, including for primary care through the fall and winter. For questions about local primary care fall/winter preparedness, see below for a list of contacts by region.

Region	**Contact**
Toronto	Rose Cook (rose.cook@ontariohealth.ca)
East	Dr. David Zelt (david.zelt@ontariohealth.ca)
West	Dr. Jennifer Everson (jennifer.everson@ontariohealth.ca)
Central	Dr. Mira Backo-Shannon (mira.backo-shannon@ontariohealth.ca)
North East and North West	Dr. Paul Preston (paul.preston@ontariohealth.ca)