

Mandatory Masking in Public Spaces: Considerations for Physiotherapists

On November 24th, the provincial government made it mandatory for masks to be worn in indoor workplaces in Edmonton, Calgary and surrounding areas. Failure to comply with the Government of Alberta order carries the risk of a \$1,000 fine, and prosecution for up to \$100,000 for a first offense. Municipal bylaws are and have been in effect in several Alberta communities for some time.

According to the Legislative Responsibilities Standard of Practice, physiotherapists are required to be knowledgeable of and compliant with the legislation relevant to their practice. This includes having knowledge of CMOH Order 38-2020 which requires indoor mask use in specific regions and municipal bylaws regarding mask use that may be in effect in their municipality.

At the same time, the Code of Ethical Conduct states that members of the physiotherapy profession have an ethical responsibility to *“Act in a respectful manner and do not refuse care or treatment to any client on the prohibited grounds of discrimination as specified in the Canadian Human Rights Act as well as on the grounds of social or health status.”*

Declining to provide care is a serious matter. There are conflicting needs, values and rights involved in such a decision, including:

- The patient’s right to access to care and the requirement that access not be denied on the basis of a protected ground or health status, including health conditions that may preclude the use of a mask.
- The physiotherapist’s duty to comply with legislation relevant to their practice.
- Patients’ expectations that they will receive safe care, as stated in the Safety Standard of Practice.
- The health and safety of everyone that enters the practice environment.

Physiotherapists and physiotherapy business owners should understand the many implications of refusing to provide care to a patient who declines to wear a mask in the practice setting.

Physiotherapy Alberta’s message regarding mask use is unchanged from previous. **Physiotherapists are required to wear medical grade surgical or procedure masks at all times, and in all areas of the workplace.** As previously directed:

- All staff providing direct patient care must wear a surgical/procedure mask continuously, at all times and in all areas of the workplace if they are either providing direct patient care or cannot maintain two-meter distance from patients and co-workers.
- Staff who do not work in patient care areas (e.g., administration staff) must also wear a mask continuously if a physical barrier (e.g., plexiglass) or two-meter physical distancing cannot be maintained.

Clinicians are further encouraged to:

- Educate their patients on the orders that are relevant in their local area.
- Be aware of and educate their colleagues and patients of the rationale for mask use.
- Consider telerehabilitation services instead of in-person services, particularly when treating patients who are unable or unwilling to wear masks, or who are at elevated risk of severe outcomes if they become ill with COVID-19.

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