

Update: December 9, 2020

On December 8, 2020, Premier Kenney and Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) Dr. Hinshaw announced new measures to address the COVID-19 situation in Alberta and rising active case numbers, hospitalizations and ICU admissions due to the virus. The situation in Alberta is serious and Physiotherapy Alberta, like many Albertans, is concerned for the health and safety of the public, the safety of patients who access physiotherapy services, and the safety of our regulated members working in all sectors and patient care settings.

Some individuals and media sources have referred to the restrictions announced on the 8th as a second lockdown; however, the rules related to health services are much different than those imposed in the spring and expressly enable the provision of regulated health services.

What does this mean for physiotherapists?

As stated by Premier Kenney during the December 8th press conference, and as indicated on the [Government of Alberta website](#), health services provided by regulated health professionals **“can remain open by appointment only as long as public health orders and sector guidance is followed. Appointments should be limited to one-on-one services.”** For physiotherapists and other regulated health professionals, this is a continuation of the requirements put in place on November 27th.

The Government of Alberta has clearly stated that home-based businesses providing regulated health services can also continue to operate and “should follow the restrictions in place based on the type of service they provide.” In other words, the restrictions and practices established for **physiotherapy community services** apply to physiotherapy **home-based or mobile services**.

For physiotherapists working in **long-term or continuing care environments**, much appears to hinge on the site’s outbreak status. Physiotherapy Alberta is aware that the CMOH has issued a letter to continuing care operators and we advise individuals working in these environments to speak to the operator of the site to understand the directions of the CMOH, the site’s outbreak status and resulting rules in effect, and how those rules impact the physiotherapy services provided. Physiotherapists offering private mobile services in continuing care environments will similarly need to work with continuing care operators to address questions regarding access to the site and the ability to provide in-person services.

It is fortunate that patients will continue to be able to access the physiotherapy services they need; however, the ability to continue to offer physiotherapy services relies upon compliance with sector guidance. For physiotherapists that is the [Guidance for Resuming Physiotherapy Practice During a Pandemic](#).

As Physiotherapy Alberta has said for the duration of the pandemic, it is the adherence with **all** measures that offers robust protection against virus spread within physiotherapy practice environments. No one measure alone will be enough to protect patients and staff and prevent a physiotherapy practice site from becoming a source of virus transmission. The [Infection Prevention and Control Visual Guide](#) helps to summarize these measures into a brief checklist that can be used to review day-to-day operations and ensure that the measures put in place back in May when in-person services were first allowed to resume are still being rigorously followed today.

The Devil's in the Details

As the expression goes, the devil really is in the details. Some other things physiotherapists must be aware of:

- Physiotherapy services should be limited to one-on-one services.
 - Telerehabilitation services should be offered whenever they can reasonably address the patient's care needs. This includes offering hybrid models of service with some in-person and some telerehabilitation visits when appropriate.
 - This also means no group classes.
 - As we have said in the past, physiotherapists also need to be cautious about the risk created when moving between patients who are in the clinic at the same time. It is advised that each staff member have only one patient under their direct care at any given time.
- Gyms and other recreation facilities such as yoga or Pilates studios are required to close effective December 13th.
 - Physiotherapists operating out of these types of facilities will need to discuss their ability to provide ongoing one-on-one physiotherapy services within these locations with the facility operator.
 - Physiotherapists operating out of these facilities should also be aware that members of the public may contact local enforcement agencies if they observe physiotherapy patients and staff present at these locations, even if the physiotherapist is adhering to the CMOH orders and only providing one-on-one physiotherapy services.
- Individuals operating multidisciplinary clinics must be aware that the ability to provide health services is limited to services provided by regulated health professionals.
 - No massage services can be offered at this time.

Regarding PPE

Physiotherapists are required to engage in **continuous masking using medical grade surgical and procedure masks at all times, and in all areas of the workplace.**

Physiotherapy Alberta is aware that Alberta Health Services (AHS) has recently issued a directive that its employees must wear eye protection (face shields or goggles) in addition to continuous masking. Physiotherapy Alberta's understanding is that AHS has issued this directive as an employer. Employers always have the option of implementing measures that exceed the standards and requirements of Physiotherapy Alberta.

To date, Physiotherapy Alberta has not been made aware of any changes to Alberta Health directives that require continuous eye protection. If the directions of the CMOH or Alberta Health change such that eye protection is mandatory, Physiotherapy Alberta will advise our regulated members of the change. Physiotherapists who provide services contracted by AHS will need to review their contracts or contact AHS to determine if and when the AHS requirement for eye protection applies to them.

Physiotherapists are directed to continue to engage in Point of Care Risk Assessments of every patient interaction and to employ the appropriate PPE as indicated by that risk assessment.

As already stated, no single measure will prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is the careful adherence to and application of all measures that will protect patients and providers alike.

Recently, Dr. Bonnie Henry, British Columbia's Chief Medical Officer of Health, commented that people need to follow the spirit of the rules put in place, rather than looking at the letter of the law and looking for loopholes. Although Dr. Henry was speaking about the situation in BC, her comments are instructive for us all. The clear spirit of the new Government of Alberta measures is to enable the cautious and safe provision of regulated health services, recognizing their vital importance to Albertans, while simultaneously doing all that we can to limit the spread of COVID-19. Physiotherapy Alberta is calling on our regulated members to continue to rise to the challenges posed by this pandemic.