

Update: January 25

Late last week, Physiotherapy Alberta was advised of a recent change to the [Alberta Public Health Disease Management Guidelines: Coronavirus – COVID19](#).

**Alberta Health has updated its guidance regarding eye protection:**

*“Eye protection is now **recommended** as an additional layer of protection for all patient interactions within two metres in areas where there are ongoing high levels of community transmission.” (pg. 31)*

This recommendation appears to align with the direction that masking and hand hygiene alone are “*NOT considered sufficient PPE for HCWs who work with **symptomatic** patients or confirmed/probable cases.*” (pg. 27)

Alberta Health has further indicated that:

*“If a HCW was wearing a surgical/procedure mask, eye protection and was practicing good hand hygiene and had **brief/transient contact** with a **patient who had symptoms** that were not recognized to be COVID-19 at the time (e.g., confusion) that HCW **may not** be considered a close contact, but this assessment would have to be done on a case by case basis by WHS/OHS/MOH/designate.”*

However, Alberta Health continues to indicate that:

*“Continuous masking (medical/surgical masks) and proper hand hygiene is considered to offer sufficient protection for HCWs who have cared for patients with **presymptomatic/asymptomatic** COVID-19 infection.” (pg. 27)*

This information is consistent with previous guidance provided by Physiotherapy Alberta and is the rationale for why physiotherapists are required to engage in continuous masking using medical grade surgical or procedure masks in addition to engaging in frequent, rigorous hand hygiene, regardless of the setting or sector in which they work.

## **What does this mean for physiotherapists?**

Throughout the pandemic, Physiotherapy Alberta has emphasized that no single measure is effective at preventing the spread of COVID-19 in all instances. Active screening of patients and staff for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 is required as one of several measures designed to keep COVID-19 out of a practice setting and minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission within a practice.

Like other measures, screening is imperfect. In some instances, a patient may not provide a reliable report of symptoms due to a cognitive impairment or limited capacity (e.g., pediatric patients). In other instances, a patient may not recognize that they are experiencing symptoms or may incorrectly attribute a symptom to a non-COVID related cause.

According to the updated information from Alberta Health, if a patient with symptoms were to enter the practice the physiotherapist may not be considered a close contact if they were wearing a surgical/procedure mask, eye protection and were practicing good hand hygiene.

For these reasons, physiotherapists are advised to follow the recommendations of Alberta Health and implement eye protection as part of their routine PPE. Eye protection is a strategy to reduce the physiotherapist's individual risk of becoming ill.

The minimum mandatory PPE requirement is continuous masking using a medical grade surgical or procedure mask.

However, it would be uncommon for physiotherapy services to be described as "brief/transient" by patients or physiotherapists. It is not yet clear how the parameters of "brief/transient" contact will be defined. Physiotherapists should therefore be aware that even though use of eye protection may reduce their individual risk of illness, it may not prevent them from being determined to be a close contact of, and therefore required to quarantine due to contact with, a patient who had symptoms at the time of treatment that were not recognized to be COVID-19.

Any decision regarding quarantine requirements will be done on a case-by-case basis by public health officials.

If a physiotherapist is contacted and advised that they are a close contact to a patient who has tested positive, they will need to discuss the particulars of the patient interaction and PPE and other measures in use during that interaction and seek additional information regarding their specific case to understand why they are being considered a close contact.

**Physiotherapists are to follow the directions of public health officials if directed to quarantine.**

#### **Selecting Eye Protection:**

Eye protection is to be used in addition to continuous masking. Examples of appropriate eye protection include safety glasses, reusable goggles, face shields or face masks with built-in eye shields.

**Vision correcting eyeglasses are not classified as eye protection and do not address PPE recommendations.**

Some eye protection is single use, while other products are reusable following cleaning and disinfection. Always follow manufacturer instructions regarding whether eye protection is reusable and the approved cleaning and disinfecting products for the eye protection in use.

For physiotherapists working with patients who are not symptomatic, eye protection may be worn continuously and changed when a mask is changed, or when the eye protection becomes wet or soiled.

Physiotherapists working with patients with known or presumed COVID-19 must follow the directions of Infection Prevention and Control officials regarding PPE use and when PPE must be changed.