

On July 28, 2021, Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr Hinshaw provided an update regarding COVID-19 in Alberta. At that time, she announced new and upcoming changes to how Alberta will manage the pandemic.

## **What changes were announced?**

### **Effective July 29, 2021**

- Contact tracers will not notify close contacts of positive cases. They will ask that individuals do so when informed of their positive result.
- Close contacts of an individual with COVID-19 will no longer be legally required to quarantine, unless directed to do so by local public health officials.
- Individuals with COVID-19 symptoms and confirmed cases will still be required to isolate.
- Testing will continue to be available provincewide for individuals who are symptomatic. Asymptomatic COVID-19 testing will no longer be recommended.

### **Effective August 16, 2021**

- The 10-day isolation period following a positive test result will no longer be mandatory but will be strongly recommended.
- Testing will no longer be recommended for those with mild symptoms for whom a result will not change their treatment. Testing will be available for Albertans with symptoms when it is needed to help direct patient care decisions.
- Mask use for public transit, including ride share vehicles, taxis, motor coaches and shuttles will no longer be required. However, individuals may choose to continue to wear masks, and businesses and municipalities are free to set masking requirements as they see fit.

### **Effective September 1, 2021**

- Testing will be available for Albertans with symptoms when it is needed to help direct patient care decisions. Testing will be available through primary care settings including physicians' offices. For those with severe illness requiring urgent or emergency care, testing will be available in acute care and hospital settings.

Physiotherapy Alberta advises all physiotherapists to “stay the course” with measures already in use.

Without orders in place from the CMOH requiring masks in public settings or mandating isolation or quarantine, Physiotherapy Alberta does not have the authority to mandate these measures be employed by our regulated members. However, the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethical Conduct remain in place and each physiotherapist is accountable to meet the requirements articulated in the Standards. Physiotherapy Alberta recognizes that there are many

unknowns in this situation and that people are challenged to know what course of action is appropriate.

## **Code of Ethical Conduct Considerations**

The Code of Ethical Conduct is founded on the underlying principles of beneficence and least harm. We encourage all physiotherapists to carefully consider what is in the interest of their patient population and what actions on their part will result in the least harm to their patients. In doing so we encourage physiotherapists to consider the following:

- A proportion of Alberta's population remains unvaccinated or is only partially vaccinated. This includes individuals who are vaccine hesitant and those who are not yet eligible. As of July 27, 2021,
  - 24.4% of Alberta's vaccine eligible population has yet to receive a single dose of COVID-19 vaccine.
  - 35.7% of Alberta's total population (including individuals under the age of 12) has yet to receive a single dose of COVID-19 vaccine.
  - A full 45.3% of Alberta's total population has not yet received 2 doses of COVID-19 vaccine.
- Among those vaccinated, a proportion of individuals will not develop an adequate immune response to be protected from the virus and from severe illness.
- Physiotherapists work with vulnerable people every day. People may seek physiotherapy services for one issue but may have other conditions that put them at greater risk of negative outcomes from communicable diseases. Other patients may be caregivers for small children or vulnerable individuals and may be attempting to shield those around them from harm.
- Long COVID is currently thought to affect a significant proportion of those who become infected with COVID-19. The risk of developing long COVID is not currently thought to be correlated with the severity of acute COVID-19 infection. Vaccination may prevent severe illness and hospitalization or death, however vaccination does not necessarily prevent symptomatic illness.

## **Standards of Practice**

The Standards of Practice articulate some specific expectations that are relevant to the current situation in Alberta, and to the management of all communicable diseases.

The Safety Standard of Practice includes the following statements:

- “The physiotherapist promotes and maintains a safe environment for clients, health-care providers, her/himself, and others to support quality services.”
- “Clients can expect to be safe in the care of the physiotherapist and in the practice environment.”

The Infection Control Standard includes the expectations that the physiotherapist:

- “Adheres to best practices of infection prevention and control in physiotherapy practice according to applicable legislation, regulatory requirements, standards, and guidelines.”
- “Uses routine practices (e.g., hand washing, point-of-care risk assessment, use of personal protective equipment) to minimize or prevent the spread of acquired infections in the health-care setting.”

With this information in mind, the guidance provided by Physiotherapy Alberta on June 30th remains in effect. We encourage all physiotherapists to review that information in full.

## **Screening**

Asking if an individual is a close contact of someone with COVID-19 or has been directed to self-isolate or quarantine by AHS or Canada Border Services remain valid questions.

Physiotherapy Alberta acknowledges that there will be far less contact tracing conducted by Alberta Health Services in the coming days. However, individuals who test positive for COVID-19 will be asked to advise their close contacts. Individuals crossing international borders may still be directed to isolate by Canadian Border Services depending on their vaccination status and country of origin, and individuals connected to a COVID-19 cases arising in high-risk settings may still be contacted by Public Health Officials.

Asking patients and staff about signs and symptoms remains a valid practice.

Regardless of whether it is legally required that individuals stay home when ill, this action is strongly recommended and remains a recognized infection prevention and control best practice. It is therefore recommended that physiotherapists defer in-person services to patients who are demonstrating signs and symptoms of any communicable disease.

It is an expectation articulated in both the Code of Ethical Conduct and the Standards of Practice that physiotherapists stay home when they are ill and attend to their own health.

## **Point of Care Risk Assessments**

Point of Care Risk Assessments must remain a mainstay of safe clinical practice as mandatory measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are rescinded. Physiotherapists will need to complete these assessments prior to every patient interaction, considering the task, the patient, and the environment, as well as the physiotherapist’s own risk tolerance, when determining whether to provide in-person physiotherapy services and what personal protective equipment to employ.

## **Other Infection Prevention and Control Measures**

As with other infectious diseases, physiotherapists should employ the concept of universal precautions when determining the actions or measures appropriate to protect themselves and others in the practice environment. Physiotherapists should have a high index of suspicion that

the patients they encounter in the clinical environment pose a risk of COVID-19 exposure and should act accordingly.

Physiotherapists should also continue with routine, effective hand hygiene and rigorous cleaning and disinfecting practices, acting on the assumption that every patient they encounter is a carrier of the COVID-19 virus and other communicable diseases.

## **Occupational Health and Safety**

Physiotherapy Alberta reminds employers of their legislated responsibility under provincial Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) law to provide a safe environment for patrons and staff. This includes the use of administrative, technical, and physical controls to address hazards in the work environment. Within the OH&S framework, COVID-19 is a foreseeable biological hazard that may be present in the work environment.

The changes to the rules announced on July 28th mean that there is increased uncertainty regarding whether the people in the clinical practice environment pose a risk of COVID-19 exposure to others. Physiotherapy Alberta continues to strongly encourage regulated members to seek vaccination if they have not already done so and to continue to employ infection prevention and control measures in response to this uncertainty, to protect the health of patients, colleagues, and themselves.