

Update: June 11

Open for Summer Plan – Stage 2: What Does it Mean for Physiotherapists?

Alberta entered Stage 2 of the Open for Summer Plan on June 10th. What does this mean for physiotherapists?

Not much.

Hospitalization numbers are down and have been below the Stage 2 target (500 people in hospital) for some time. More than 60% of eligible Albertans have now received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. In fact, on [June 8th, Dr. Hinshaw](#) reported that 67% of eligible Albertans have received one dose of the vaccine and 15% are now fully vaccinated. This is cause for celebration.

As a result of these accomplishments, many restrictions are easing, however the changes set to take place will have limited, if any effect on physiotherapists.

Services By Appointment Only

The requirement for one-on-one service provision by appointment only remains in place across the province for physiotherapists and other regulated health professionals.

Some physiotherapists have asked about the provision that allows personal and wellness services to resume walk-in services.

It is important to keep in mind that personal and wellness services are treated as distinct from health, social and professional services by the Government of Alberta and have been subject to different restrictions for the duration of the pandemic. Recent changes to the rules for personal and wellness services, do not affect health service provision and the rules that apply to physiotherapists or other regulated health professionals.

Group Classes

However, given the re-opening of gyms and fitness studios, physiotherapists may be able to resume group exercise-based physiotherapy interventions such as GLA:D programs, falls and balance classes, or Parkinson's group classes, provided that they complete a point of care risk assessment and implement measures that mitigate the risks identified. Such measures include:

- Avoiding instructor close contact with participants and movement between participants.

- Limiting class sizes to the number of participants that will fit within the space available while maintaining 3-meter physical distancing from each other at all times.
- Not sharing equipment between participants.
- Not mixing class cohorts.
- Limiting participant socializing before and after class.
- Employing all other measures currently required for all in-person physiotherapy services (e.g., hand sanitizing, use of masks, patient screening).

Although Physiotherapy Alberta's view is that group exercise interventions may be provided to these groups, where appropriate measures can be implemented, we also know that the populations served by these programs are different from that of the general population seen in the gym environment. As such a higher standard of care is required.

Providers who are unable to meet these expectations and mitigate relevant risks to providing group exercise-based interventions are directed to provide these interventions on a one-on-one basis.

Other Measures Continue

As Physiotherapy Alberta stated in the June 2nd update, the requirements to engage in continuous masking, patient screening, and use of infection prevention and control measures are unchanged as we enter Stage 2. Physiotherapists are reminded that vaccination in and of itself does not eliminate COVID-19 or the risk of exposure to the virus. While vaccines are highly effective at preventing severe illness and death, it is still possible to be exposed and to become ill from COVID-19. In some respects, the risk of exposure will increase in the coming weeks as restrictions are eased, even as vaccine uptake helps to prevent severe outcomes.

Maintaining the use of PPE, rigorous hand hygiene, physical distancing, patient and staff screening, and cleaning and disinfecting practices is essential.

Stage 3 Reopening

Physiotherapy Alberta has heard from some of our regulated members with questions about what to expect as we progress through the Open for Summer Plan and reach Stage 3 of reopening. We do not yet know when Stage 3 will occur. While we anticipate that many of the restrictions currently in place will be lifted in the coming weeks, Dr. Hinshaw has indicated that some protective measures may still be mandated after Stage 3 reopening, to mitigate the risk of virus spread particularly within health care settings and among vulnerable populations. These details have not yet been released.

Organizational leaders and private employers of physiotherapists are reminded that Occupational Health and Safety Legislation also establishes the requirement that employers implement appropriate measures to control the health and safety hazards workers are exposed

to in the work environment. COVID-19 is categorized as a biological hazard. As such, employers will need to consider the ongoing use of Infection Prevention and Control measures and other measures to control this hazard, even as public health orders are lifted.

Taking Stock of What Was Learned

As Dr Hinshaw has noted, the measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 also had the unanticipated effect of Alberta reporting no cases of the flu over the [2020-21 flu season](#). As we enter this next phase of the pandemic, it is a good time to take stock of what we have learned over the course of the last 15 months and what infection prevention and control practices we may choose to retain as we go forwards, regardless of the prevalence of COVID-19 in our communities or the public health orders in effect.

One thing that we are reasonably certain of: even as restrictions are eased and things return to more typical day-to-day operations, we are unlikely to return to a normal that resembles practice as it was in 2019.