

Update June 25, 2021: What Does Alberta’s Open for Summer Mean for Physiotherapists?

As July 1, 2021 approaches and province-wide restrictions are scheduled to be lifted, Physiotherapy Alberta has received many calls and emails from physiotherapists with questions regarding what practices they will need to continue to employ on an ongoing basis.

Stage 3 of the Open for Summer Plan represents a new phase of the pandemic, one in which employers and front-line clinicians will have increased autonomy and responsibility to monitor their unique risks and emerging trends in the practice environment and to implement the measures that they deem necessary to control those risks.

Physiotherapy Alberta is awaiting further direction from Dr. Hinshaw and Alberta Health regarding what measures and practices will be recommended or required in community health settings. We are also aware that some municipalities may also implement bylaws affecting physiotherapy practice.

So far, Physiotherapy Alberta is reasonably certain of the following:

Hand Hygiene

While hand hygiene practices gained much attention at the start of the pandemic, routine, vigorous hand hygiene is a best practice that should be employed to control the spread of all infectious diseases, at all times, and in all patient care settings.

Hand hygiene can be completed using alcohol-based hand rub (minimum 60% alcohol content), or through hand washing using soap and water. When hands are visibly soiled, they must be cleaned with soap and water. Physiotherapists are expected to practice routine hand hygiene consistent with the World Health Organization’s “5 Moments for Hand Hygiene”:²

- Before touching a patient
- Before clean/aseptic procedures
- After body fluid exposure or risk
- After touching a patient
- After touching patient surroundings

Hand hygiene facilities (soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub) should be readily available within the practice environment and patients should also be encouraged to complete hand hygiene.

Cleaning and Disinfecting

Cleaning and disinfecting practices also gained much attention at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, it is expected, routine practice that:

- Patient care/patient contact items are cleaned and disinfected between each patient/use.
- High-touch, non-patient care items are cleaned and disinfected twice a day and more frequently as use and circumstances warrant.
- Cleaning and disinfection practices are completed in accordance with manufacturer's instructions for cleaning and disinfecting of equipment.
- Virucidal disinfectants or diluted bleach solution are used to complete the disinfection step of cleaning and disinfecting surfaces.³
- Cleaning and disinfecting products are used according to manufacturer's directions for application and contact time.

Screening

Physiotherapists working in community health settings (e.g., private practice clinics, mobile practice settings), are advised to continue to engage in active screening of both patients and staff prior to their admittance to the practice environment.

Physiotherapists are reminded that individuals with even mild symptoms of COVID-19 are legally required to self-isolate and must not be in the practice setting, regardless of their vaccination status.

Due to the multiple considerations that may affect the direction an individual may receive regarding the requirement to quarantine following international travel or close contact with a case of COVID-19, physiotherapists are advised to add the following question to their current screening processes:

Have you been directed by Alberta Health Services or the Canadian Border Services Agency to quarantine?

Individuals who have been directed to quarantine must not be in the practice setting.

Point of Care Risk Assessment

Physiotherapists are advised to complete a Point of Care Risk Assessments prior to every patient interaction, regardless of the practice setting in which they work.

Assess the task, the patient, and the environment to determine the risk of exposure to blood or body fluids and the PPE required to perform the patient care task safely. Risks can relate to patient factors, provider factors, and the interventions performed. Physiotherapists will also need to consider their individual risk tolerance when determining the personal protective equipment to employ when engaging in direct patient care activities.

The measures indicated by the PoCRA must be consistent with or in addition to any mandatory measures in place at the direction of the CMOH or municipal governments.

Physiotherapist Use of Masks

Physiotherapy Alberta is awaiting further direction from Dr. Hinshaw and Alberta Health regarding use of masks in community health settings after July 1, 2021.

Until updated direction regarding mask use in community health settings is received, Physiotherapy Alberta strongly recommends physiotherapists in all practice settings to continue to wear medical grade surgical or procedure masks, 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. This recommendation is consistent with the guidance on use of masks contained in the [Alberta Public Health Disease Management Guidelines: Coronavirus – COVID-19](#).

Dr Hinshaw announced on [June 22, 2021](#) that continuous masking will continue to be required in continuing care centers and acute care facilities.

Patient Use of Masks

Comments made on [June 22, 2021, by Dr. Hinshaw](#) appear to indicate that ongoing mask use in continuing care and acute care environments will apply to all individuals in those environments including patients and visitors.

It is not yet clear if patient use of masks in community health settings will be mandated by the CMOH. If the CMOH does not mandate use of masks in community settings, physiotherapists may question whether they can require masking as a condition of service. As Physiotherapy Alberta has stated before, this is a complex issue with conflicting needs, values and rights involved in such a decision. 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 before making any policy decisions in this regard.

Physiotherapists are also advised to pay close attention to any municipal bylaws that may mandate the use of masks in indoor settings in their area.

Use of Other PPE

[Alberta Health](#) recommends the use of eye protection as an additional layer of protection for all patient interactions within two metres, **in areas where there are ongoing high levels of community transmission.**

Eye protection is intended to protect the health-care provider from potential COVID exposures arising from interactions with **patients who had symptoms** that were not recognized to be COVID-19 at the time of their appointment (e.g., due to patient confusion).

Use of eye protection, during routine clinical care in community practice settings may not be necessary, depending on the level of ongoing transmission of COVID-19 in the physiotherapist's

community and the Point of Care Risk Assessment performed by the treating physiotherapist. Eye protection is not mandated by Physiotherapy Alberta.

While other PPE may not be required to prevent the spread of COVID-19 when working with asymptomatic patients, physiotherapists should assess the tasks they are planning and continue to employ PPE typically used when performing the interventions planned (e.g., gloves when needling).

In Summary

The easing of restrictions as part of the Open for Summer Plan does not mean a return to business as it was in 2019. Practice has fundamentally changed due to the pandemic and many changes are expected to continue for the long-term. Some measures mandated to enable clinical practice during the pandemic are clinical best practices for infection prevention and control and were always expected of physiotherapists.

Over the course of the pandemic, the only certainty has been uncertainty. We recognize the toll that this takes on physiotherapists, the anxiety that it provokes, and the challenge that a fluid and rapidly changing situation poses to all parties involved in the delivery of physiotherapy services.

Physiotherapy Alberta remains committed to providing guidance to help physiotherapists address this challenge. When directives are received from the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Alberta Health, Physiotherapy Alberta will continue to share that information with our regulated members through the website and other communication channels. We encourage physiotherapists to continue to check the COVID-19 portion of the website frequently as direction to regulated members is subject to change.