

Update: November 25

Physiotherapy Alberta last issued a COVID update on November 13th. Since then, the situation in Alberta in terms of active cases, new infections, hospitalizations and ICU admissions has continued to deteriorate. As a result, the Government of Alberta declared a state of public health emergency on November 24th with [new measures](#) announced to attempt to curb the virus' spread.

The message is clear: All Albertans must contribute to efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This is a time for physiotherapists in community settings to re-evaluate the in-person services they provide, to engage in thoughtful risk assessment of in-person care and to optimize the use of telerehabilitation services where feasible.

Physiotherapy Alberta anticipates that most physiotherapists will be aware of yesterday's announcements. This message is intended to address some questions that we expect registered members will have in terms of how the orders apply to physiotherapy practice.

Do the restricted occupancy rules apply to physiotherapy clinics and other similar community practice settings?

Effective November 27, retail businesses in **Enhanced Status areas** must limit capacity to 25% of the occupancy set under the Alberta Fire Code. Much of Alberta is included in the Enhanced Status area. Registered members are directed to review the map and familiarize themselves with their local area's current status. You can find the map [here](#).

Upon review of the order, it is apparent that physiotherapy practices, including clinics, mobile or home-based services, and other primary care environments are not included in this restriction.

Although not subject to the 25% occupancy limits, physiotherapy practice settings are required to continue to adhere to Physiotherapy [Alberta's Guidance for Resuming Physiotherapy Practice During A Pandemic](#), including physical distancing expectations.

Where do physiotherapy practice settings fit within the order?

Physiotherapy practice settings fit within the category "businesses open by appointment only" which applies to professional services. Effective November 27th, these businesses, when located in **Enhanced Status areas**, may only be open by appointment. They are not allowed to offer walk-in services and have been directed to only offer one-on-one services.

What about group exercise classes for specific patient populations (e.g. GLA:D or balance and fall prevention classes)?

In addition to the restriction that businesses open by appointment in Enhanced Status areas may only offer one-on-one services, there are restrictions in place for indoor fitness, recreation, sports and physical activity centers. These restrictions require that no group fitness, group classes, group training, team practices or games be offered at this time.

The two directions, in combination, provide clear direction that physiotherapists may not provide group exercise classes at this time.

What does the requirement to only offer one-on-one services mean for physiotherapy practice?

As was noted in the original [Guidance for Resuming Physiotherapy Practice During a Pandemic](#), there are risks of cross contamination posed by treating more than one patient at the same time or having more than one patient per physiotherapy staff member in the practice setting at the same time. Given the current situation, physiotherapists are advised to avoid circumstances where they are responsible for more than one patient at once. For example, physiotherapists should adjust their booking practices to avoid situations where they are required to move between patients setting up interventions for one patient, then resuming provision of manual therapy to another.

This may mean that service provision by physiotherapy support workers needs to be optimized and more formally planned to enable safe service provision, or that clinic throughput is reduced.

What about in-home/mobile physiotherapy services?

Minister Shandro specifically addressed this question during the November 24th press conference and explicitly stated that health services delivered in patient homes could continue. Physiotherapists are encouraged to carefully consider the risks and benefits of service provision in these settings and to limit in-person services in these settings accordingly. Physiotherapists delivering service in these settings must adhere to the [guidance](#) already in place.

What does the mandatory mask order mean for physiotherapy practices?

Municipal bylaws are and have been in effect in several Alberta communities for some time. On November 24th, the provincial government made it mandatory for masks to be worn in indoor workplaces in Edmonton, Calgary and surrounding areas. Failure to comply with the Government of Alberta order carries the risk of a \$1,000 fine, and prosecution for up to \$100,000 for a first offense.

Physiotherapy Alberta's message regarding mask use is unchanged from previous. **Physiotherapists are required to wear medical grade surgical or procedure masks at all times, and in all areas of the workplace.** As previously directed:

- All staff providing direct patient care must wear a surgical/procedure mask continuously, 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.
- Staff who do not work in patient care areas (e.g., administration staff) must also wear a mask continuously if a physical barrier (e.g., plexiglass) or two-meter physical distancing cannot be maintained.

Clinicians are further directed to:

- Be aware of the provincial and municipal orders in effect that are relevant to their local area.
- Educate their patients on the orders that are relevant in their local area.
- Be aware of and educate their colleagues and patients of the rationale for mask use.
- Should a patient refuse to wear a mask, physiotherapists are encouraged to consider telerehabilitation services instead of in-person services.

- If physiotherapists are considering refusing care to a patient who declines to wear a mask they should understand the implications of doing so.

What about contact tracing? If a patient calls us to say that they tested positive after an attendance at a practice setting, what should the clinic do? What if the physiotherapist tests positive?

On November 23rd, Dr. Hinshaw announced that some individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19 may not receive a call from contact tracers due to a significant backlog in the system and need to focus contact tracing resources on recent cases. This has left many physiotherapists uncertain about what they are required to do if they or a patient tests positive and they are not contacted by a contact tracer.

When physiotherapists were first permitted to resume in-person service in May, Physiotherapy Alberta issued [Guidance for Resuming Physiotherapy Practice During a Pandemic](#) which outlined an extensive set of measures that physiotherapists and practice owners were required to implement. The point of all those measures is to protect the patient and the provider should a person attend the practice while asymptomatic but infected and contagious with COVID-19.

Screening of patients and staff is a key measure to keep COVID-19 out of the practice setting. Physiotherapists are reminded that they must screen patients at the time of booking an appointment and again when the patient arrives in the practice setting to ensure that they

- Have no signs or symptoms of COVID-19.
- Have not been a close contact of someone with COVID-19 in the last 14 days.
- Have not travelled outside Canada in the last 14 days.

As Physiotherapy Alberta has previously highlighted, the [Alberta Public Health Disease Management Guidelines – Coronavirus, COVID-19](#) 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. This is not considered sufficient for HCWs who work with symptomatic patients. (page 23)*
- *A surgical/procedure mask and good hand hygiene is considered sufficient PPE for asymptomatic HCW working with asymptomatic patients including within the 48 hours prior developing symptoms.*
 - *If HCW becomes symptomatic, all the patients who they cared for (or co-workers) in the 48 hours prior to symptom onset in that HCW will NOT be considered close contacts if the HCW wore a surgical/procedure mask and practiced routine, frequent hand hygiene.*
 - *If a patient becomes symptomatic, all HCW that cared for the patient in the 48 hours prior to symptom onset in that patient, would NOT be considered close contacts if they were wearing a surgical/procedure mask and practiced good hand hygiene i.e., sufficient PPE. (page 26)*

According to the Alberta Health resource, if physiotherapists are employing the measures directed by Physiotherapy Alberta, including screening, the use of medical grade surgical and procedure masks and good hand hygiene, they would not be considered a close contact of a patient who later tested positive for COVID-19, nor would their patients be considered close contacts if the physiotherapist themselves tested positive.

Physiotherapists must understand that the above information about close contacts is entirely dependent on how well they have adhered to the guidance provided.

If a physiotherapist is contacted by a contact tracer and directed to discontinue service provision due to a close contact within the practice setting, they are advised to highlight the measures in use to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to cite the Alberta Health resource when discussing the particulars of their situation. Physiotherapy Alberta cannot overrule the directions of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, Zone Medical Officers of Health or Contact Tracers, but has provided this information so that registered members can question the rationale if directions received are inconsistent with the published information.

We know we are repeating ourselves:

In the November 13th message to registrants, Physiotherapy Alberta highlighted the following key messages, which remain relevant today:

- Reducing the number of close contacts each Albertan has in their daily lives is key to limiting the spread of COVID-19. Telerehabilitation services should be considered for every patient. Physiotherapists should offer services via telerehabilitation, employing an entirely digital approach to care or using blended models of service, augmenting judicious in-person care with telerehabilitation visits, to reduce the risks of in-person care while optimizing patient outcomes.
- Physiotherapy Alberta is calling on all physiotherapists to review the [guidance document](#) published in May and the [Infection Prevention and Control Visual Guide](#) again. Check the recommendations against your current practice, identify any gaps or areas where complacency may have set in, and commit to improving in even one aspect of the administrative, elimination, engineered or personal measures in place to keep everyone safe.
- Individuals participating in the [Alberta COVID-19 Border Testing Pilot Program](#) must not attend [high-risk workplaces](#) or visit people who are at high risk of more severe disease. Participants in the program are explicitly prohibited from working at or visiting

“any setting where health care services are provided and there are vulnerable people at risk for severe disease for 14 days. This includes:

- *All outpatient clinics*
- *Acute care*
- *Continuing care*
- *Long term care*
- *Seniors lodges”*

- Physiotherapists are reminded that if they have any symptoms of COVID-19 they may not attend the practice setting. Physiotherapists are required to self-monitor for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and to employ self-isolation measures consistent with [CMOH Order 05-2020](#) should they develop symptoms. If symptoms develop while at work, physiotherapists are directed to leave immediately. Physiotherapists and their employers are also directed to screen patients for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 at the time that appointments are booked and upon the patient's arrival to the practice setting.

No individual demonstrating signs of symptoms of COVID-19 should be present in the practice setting at any time.

Physiotherapy Alberta recognizes that 2020 has been a challenging year for all regulated members. No one wants to see a return to physiotherapy service restrictions like the ones we saw in the spring. No one wants to see the acute care system overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases. No one wants to see our fellow physiotherapists working in acute care settings become ill or experience burnout due to the physical and emotional burden of caring for COVID-19 patients.

We all need to act now. Physiotherapy Alberta is confident in physiotherapists' ability to continue to provide safe and effective physiotherapy services both in-person and via telerehabilitation, across all areas of practice, and we support you in these efforts.