

Update: October 2020

It has now been nearly seven months since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Alberta, and six months since Albertans first experienced significant closures of schools and businesses in an effort to limit the spread of the virus. Although things are far from business as usual, the return to in-person services for physiotherapists in May, Stage Two re-opening in June, and the resumption of in-person classes for students in kindergarten through grade 12 in September have been greeted as welcome developments by many.

However, in recent weeks case numbers have increased across Canada as people have been engaging in more activities that take them into their communities – whether that be school, shopping, or receiving health-care services. Like others, Physiotherapy Alberta has been watching the numbers closely, trying to anticipate what will happen next and how physiotherapists will need to respond to the challenges that the pandemic continues to pose.

In recent weeks, Physiotherapy Alberta has fielded many calls from registrants regarding providing services in a range of practice contexts. While the questions posed have ranged widely in their nature, the underlying themes are consistent – how can physiotherapists operate during the pandemic and what can they do to optimize their patient care capacity at this time? Physiotherapy Alberta recognizes the challenge that COVID-19 poses to all physiotherapists, and especially those who operate small businesses. The impact of patient screening, physical distancing and rigorous cleaning and disinfecting protocols on routine operations are significant.

However, the measures put in place back in May were the key enabler to the resumption of in-person services. Their use is an ongoing requirement for in-person service provision.

As Drs. Hinshaw and Tam, and other public health experts have noted countless times, COVID-19 is not going anywhere any time soon. A return to business as it was before the pandemic is not on the horizon and will almost certainly require the development and use of effective vaccines or treatments for the virus. In the meantime, the requirements outlined in Physiotherapy Alberta's COVID-19 [guidance document](#) and [IPC visual guide](#) remain in effect. All physiotherapists are required to be familiar and compliant with the directions contained in these resources:

- Defaulting to virtual service provision when possible, educating patients on the benefits of virtual services, including the reduced risk of contracting COVID-19, and positive patient outcomes that virtual services provide.
- Staff self-screening each day, before attendance in the work environment.
- Staff self-isolation, testing, and compliance with the orders of the CMOH if they have unprotected exposure* to COVID-19, recent travel history, and/or develop symptoms.
- Patient screening prior to and upon presentation for in-person services.
- Rigorous cleaning and disinfecting of patient care equipment and high-touch surfaces in the practice environment.
- Implementation and adherence to physical distancing within the practice environment.

- Use of PPE appropriate to the tasks completed and the point of care risk assessment.

*Unprotected exposure means exposure to an individual with diagnosed or presumed COVID-19, without the use of appropriate PPE.

While it may be true that physiotherapists cannot always remain two-meters distant from their patients while providing care, when it is possible (e.g., during history taking or while completing patient education) the physiotherapist needs to engage in physical distancing. Physiotherapists are reminded that the risk of contracting COVID-19 when in the presence of someone infected with the virus increases with increasing duration of close contact.

Physical distancing of two-meters must be maintained between patients. Physical distancing and continuous masking of staff, or physical barriers must be employed to separate patients and non-patient care staff (e.g., administration/reception staff) within the setting.

With regards to PPE, physiotherapists are reminded that the minimum required PPE is a medical grade surgical or procedure mask. This direction is based on the [Alberta Public Health Disease Management Guidelines – Coronavirus, COVID-19](#) (August 28, 2020, page 23) which states:

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.

In addition:

- If engaged in an activity where additional PPE use would be a routine practice, that PPE must also be employed.
- If a patient's history or risk factors indicate that additional PPE should be used (as in the case of a patient presenting to the emergency department), it must be.
- Additional PPE use does not enable treatment of patients who present for care in private practice settings with signs or symptoms of COVID-19. These appointments must be cancelled, and the visit rescheduled for a later date when symptoms have resolved.

Individuals employed in the school system – whether as employees or contractors – are required to adhere to the same expectations as other regulated members of Physiotherapy Alberta, including the use of medical grade masks. The requirements outlined by CMOH Order – 33, which relate to use of masks by school staff and students, were designed to ensure that all those in attendance at school sites met a minimum standard of wearing a non-medical mask.

The order does not replace the direction that health professionals must meet the requirements established by their regulatory colleges.

It can be argued that the increase in in-person business activity, school attendance, and the overall increase in interpersonal contact we are seeing in Stage two of re-opening means that it is now more critical than ever that physiotherapists be diligent and rigorous in their application of the measures designed to control the spread of COVID-19. Physiotherapists are reminded that no single measure alone – screening, cleaning and disinfecting, use of PPE – will be sufficient to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The measures create successive layers of protection which when used together create a safe

practice environment for patients, physiotherapists and their colleagues. Physiotherapy Alberta is confident in our regulated members' ability to provide safe environments for physiotherapy service provision, and to do their part in managing the pandemic.

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