

What does Stage 2 of Alberta's reopening mean for physiotherapists?

On June 9, 2020 Premier Kenney and Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health, announced that Stage 2 of Alberta's reopening strategy will start on June 12, 2020. This is paired with the understanding that the current state of public health emergency will not be extended when it expires on June 15, 2020. While these are positive signs, the announcement does not mean that the risk of COVID-19 has come to an end or that the virus has stopped circulating in our communities, a fact frequently highlighted by Dr. Hinshaw.

In some ways, the implication of allowing more businesses to open and reducing restrictions applied to other businesses means that the risk of virus transmission is increased as more people are out in public, making it more important than ever to have measures in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. While it is fair to ask what stage 2 means for physiotherapists, it may be easier to comment on what it does **not** mean.

When the public health emergency was declared on March 17, 2020, it provided the Government of Alberta with certain legislated powers to act to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. However, the Chief Medical Officer of Health's ability to issue public health orders is not limited by the expiry of the public health emergency – a point that both Dr. Hinshaw and Premier Kenney made clear during the June 9, 2020 press conference. As both stated, the public health orders and directions of the CMOH will remain in place for the foreseeable future, and new measures may be implemented by the CMOH if needed to further mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

So, what does this mean for physiotherapists?

It means that the order that allowed physiotherapists to re-open on May 4 remain in effect and that physiotherapists need to continue doing what they are already doing, consistently following the directions outlined in the [Guidance for Resuming Physiotherapy Practice During a Pandemic](#).

Continue practicing physical distancing in clinical spaces, continue frequent and effective hand hygiene, continue screening patients and staff for signs/symptoms and risks of COVID-19 before they enter the practice setting, and continue with rigorous environmental cleaning and disinfecting practices.

Some of these measures are designed to decrease the volume of direct interpersonal contact patients and providers experience and thus the risks that such contact poses, by decreasing the volume of patients in clinical settings and the number of patients seen in a day. Other measures have this effect, even though that may not be the intent of the measure. This has clear implications for physiotherapy business owners, and physiotherapists working in fee for service practice settings.

While [CMOH Order-16-2020](#) removed prior restrictions on in-person health services, allowing physiotherapists to resume non-essential/non-urgent health services with the condition that they do so in compliance with guidance from Physiotherapy Alberta and the Workplace Guidance for Community Health Settings included in the order, it is not business as usual.

Moving to Stage 2 does not change this fact. The knowledge that COVID-19 continues to circulate in our communities means that any services provided must be delivered with caution and after careful consideration of whether the anticipated benefits of in-person services outweigh the risks. This is

particularly true when physiotherapists work with seniors, individuals who are immunocompromised, or others who are at increased risk of severe outcomes if they contract COVID-19.

Many of the patients that physiotherapists routinely treat fall into these categories, therefore [telerehabilitation](#) remains a recommended method of service delivery to provide care while reducing risk, even as Alberta moves to Stage 2. It is recognized that not all patients are appropriate for telerehabilitation services, just as not all patients are appropriate for in-person services at this time.

Realizing that the measures in place which decrease the number of patients that can be seen in a day will continue as Alberta progresses through the stages of relaunch, physiotherapists will need to make decisions regarding patient prioritization and which patients are most likely to benefit from or are in greatest need of in-person services for some time. This is unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory for many physiotherapists. For this reason, Physiotherapy Alberta previously published guidance on [patient prioritization](#); however, physiotherapists will need to adapt this guidance to their specific practice context.

What about exercise and the reopening of exercise facilities?

Exercise is one of the best evidenced interventions that physiotherapists employ in their practices. The announcement that exercise facilities will be allowed to re-open as part of Stage 2, rather than Stage 3 as originally thought, has significant implications for physiotherapists, especially those whose practices are co-located in gyms or other exercise facilities (e.g., yoga studios). Here's what physiotherapists should know:

- Exercise has been identified as one of the highest risk activities.
- There are specific [directions from Alberta Health](#) regarding how these facilities can resume safe operation, including:
 - Facility users are expected to undergo screening for symptoms and risks of COVID-19 and to engage in physical distancing.
 - Where possible, users are encouraged to bring their own equipment. If that is not possible, equipment should not be shared and must be cleaned and disinfected between users.

Physiotherapists who operate within exercise facilities should review the requirements that these facilities must adhere to in their entirety, communicate with facility operators regarding how to enable safe patient access, and consider the risks and merits of having patients perform exercise programs on site versus having them perform exercise programs in their own homes only.

Physiotherapists should also be aware that “with intense physical activity, masks create risks of negative health effects and ‘[should not be worn](#)’” (Return to Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation – Stage 2, pg. 10) and consider how this information applies to their practice.

Are there any other changes regarding mask use?

Continuous masking requirements and other information regarding mask use, discussed in the [FAQ: Masks and Physiotherapy](#) and [Guidance document](#) remain in effect for physiotherapists and other regulated health professionals.

Physiotherapists have a role to play in communicating the recommendations from the CMOH regarding use of masks by members of the public to their patients but should also keep in mind that some individuals are unable to wear face coverings due to respiratory conditions. Many of these individuals are the same people who are at increased risk of poor outcomes if they develop COVID-19, and as such, physiotherapists should again consider if the benefits of in-person services outweigh the risks, and how those risks can be effectively managed.

Protecting vulnerable populations

Another consistent message from both the CMOH and the Premier is that all Albertans need to help to build a “wall of protection” around our most vulnerable community members. While Stage 2 means that many restrictions are easing, the restrictions related to long-term care and supported living facilities remain in place. Physiotherapy staff working in these settings and those physiotherapists who provide privately paid mobile services to residents of these settings must comply with the directions of facility operators, and the [Updated Operational and Outbreak Standards for Licensed Supportive Living and Long-Term Care](#) issued under CMOH Order 23-2020.

All providers of mobile or home-based physiotherapy services are reminded that these practice settings pose some additional risks to physiotherapists and patients alike, most especially the risk of the physiotherapist becoming a vector of virus transmission as they travel between sites. Physiotherapists who provide mobile or home-based services are urged to employ an excess of caution when providing services, engaging in patient screening, continuous masking, frequent, routine hand hygiene, and rigorous cleaning and disinfecting practices as with other practice settings.

What about multidisciplinary practice?

The orders allowing resumption of non-urgent, non-essential health services in Stage 1 of the relaunch strategy only applied to health professionals regulated under the *Health Professions Act*. As such, health professionals such as acupuncturists, who are currently regulated under the *Health Disciplines Act*, and unregulated health providers, such as massage therapists and personal trainers, were not allowed to resume services. As Alberta moves into Stage 2 of relaunch, providers of wellness services are able to resume operations. [Specific guidance](#) is in place for these services. If a physiotherapy business employs health providers within this category, they must review and comply with the guidance provided by the Government of Alberta, in addition to the guidance provided by Physiotherapy Alberta.

The guidance for wellness services specifies that providers and patients accessing these services wear a “non-medical mask at a minimum”; however, where these services are provided in the context of a multidisciplinary clinic it is recommended that all health providers working within the clinic make use of the same PPE – a surgical or procedure mask.

The following guidance from this resource is also of note for both massage therapists and physiotherapists who employ massage techniques in their physiotherapy practice:

- “Where massage occurs using oils or creams, hands should be washed with soap and water in a sink. Hand sanitizer is not effective on soiled hands.”

Conclusion

What we have seen from the press conferences in recent days is that the language used has pivoted to focusing on risk mitigation, rather than risk elimination. As Dr. Hinshaw has stated, there is no one re-opening scenario that is risk free. All we can do is balance risk with measures to manage those risks. This appears to be the direction the Government of Alberta is taking – allowing cautious re-opening while mandating that business owners take steps to make operations as safe as possible within the current context. As we approached Stage 1 of re-opening, Dr Hinshaw also commented that she thought and perhaps even hoped that businesses would publicize and highlight the steps that they were taking to keep patrons safe, using this information to reassure clients and to promote their business. Physiotherapists and physiotherapy businesses should consider doing exactly this, reassuring clients and promoting themselves as cautious, safe providers of essential health services.