

Ministry of Health

# COVID-19 Guidance: Testing of Individuals in Pharmacies

Version 2.0 November 18, 2021

## Highlights of Changes

- Updated to allow for PCR testing of symptomatic individuals and high-risk contacts in pharmacies.

This document is intended for pharmacies that will be conducting COVID-19 PCR specimen collection, as per the provincial guidance for individuals eligible for testing within the publicly funded health care system in Ontario. See the [COVID-19 Guidance: Considerations for Privately Initiated Testing](#) for organizations participating in private COVID-19 testing outside of the public health care system in Ontario.

This guidance document provides basic information only. This document is not intended to provide or take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or legal advice. In the event of a conflict between this guidance document and any applicable legislation, or orders or directives issued by the Minister of Health or the Chief Medical Officer of Health, the legislation, order or directive prevails.

- Please check the [Guidance for the Health Care Sector](#) regularly for updated versions of this document, the case definition, testing guidance, and other COVID-19 related information.
- Please check the [Directives, Memorandums, and Other Resources](#) page regularly for the most up to date directives.

## Eligibility

Pharmacy PCR testing may be offered to, or arranged for individuals as outlined in the [COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance](#), including:

- Asymptomatic individuals in the [targeted testing groups](#);
- Symptomatic individuals with **any** symptom listed in the [COVID-19 Reference Document for Symptoms](#)
- Individuals that have been identified as a high-risk contact of a known COVID-19 case;
- Asymptomatic individuals who have received a positive antigen point-of-care test (POCT) or positive self-test kit result.

See the [COVID-19 Guidance: Considerations for Antigen Point-of-Care Testing](#) for information for pharmacies conducting antigen point-of-care testing.

- [Antigen POCT](#) is only permitted for asymptomatic screening purposes (i.e. should not be used for individuals seeking a diagnostic test due to any COVID-19 symptoms and/or close contact to a known COVID-19 case).
- POCT for serology (antibody testing) is not permitted.

## Health and Safety Requirements

All pharmacies that plan to participate in COVID-19 specimen collection are required to implement and follow infection prevention and control measures to help protect their workers, patients, and customers against COVID-19. Participating pharmacies must implement the following measures:

### 1. Physical Distancing

- Pharmacies should ensure that there is enough space on their premises to follow physical distancing guidelines of maintaining at least 2 metres between people.

- Pharmacies should instruct patients to enter the pharmacy through a point of entry from the outdoors (as opposed to walking through commercial spaces for entry) whenever available.
- Implement ways to minimize traffic flow throughout the retail space, e.g. physical markings, limiting capacity inside the store, creating unidirectional flow, separate points of entry/exit are preferred where possible, etc. See the section 'Positive Patient Screening: What to do' for recommended flow of individuals that screen positive for COVID-19 symptoms or exposure.

In the setting of each pharmacy, consider ways to minimize interactions and optimize distancing between patients accessing testing and other customers. Consider what can be done to minimize staff interactions with other staff and with patients and customers. Ensure that physical distancing of at least 2 metres is maintained between all individuals (e.g. worker to worker or worker to customer).

## 2. Masks/Face Coverings

- All individuals inside the pharmacy must [wear a mask or face covering](#) in a manner that covers their mouth, nose and chin (compliance with limited exceptions).
  - Individuals who are symptomatic for COVID-19 or who have a recent exposure and are entering the pharmacy for the purpose of testing must be informed to arrive wearing at least a surgical/procedure mask (medical mask). If the individual is not wearing a surgical/procedure mask upon arrival, they should be provided a surgical/procedure mask.

## 3. Signage

- Post [signage](#) promoting public health measures at the entrance of the pharmacy. Include direction on not entering the premises for individuals with [signs and symptoms of COVID-19](#), unless people are entering for COVID-19 testing.
- Signage to include messaging on the importance of proper [hand hygiene](#), [physical distancing](#), face covering/masks, and [respiratory etiquette](#).

- Signage to indicate that the pharmacy location provides COVID-19 testing for symptomatic individuals, if applicable, and provide specific direction for individuals seeking COVID-19 testing.

#### 4. Ventilation

- Optimize ventilation within the pharmacy to maximize airflow. This may include increasing outdoor air ventilation (minimize recirculation), increasing HVAC filter efficiency and re-directing air flow from AC units and fans at head level. Refer to PHO's Resource on [Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning \(HVAC\) Systems in Buildings and COVID-19](#).

#### 5. Physical environment

- Perform routine environmental cleaning. All common areas should be regularly cleaned and disinfected at a minimum of a daily frequency, following Public Health Ontario's [Cleaning and Disinfection for Public Settings](#) document.
  - High touch surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected at least twice a day in addition to when visibly dirty.
  - Plexiglass and other physical barriers are to be included in routine cleaning and disinfection (e.g. daily) using a cleaning product that will not affect the integrity or function of the barrier.
  - After any patient contact, surfaces (i.e., areas within 2 metres of the patient, including specimen collection area) should be cleaned and disinfected as soon as possible and always in between patients, allowing for sufficient contact time for the disinfectant used. Refer to PIDAC's [Best Practices for Environmental Cleaning for Prevention and Control in All Health Care Settings](#) and [Interim Guidance for Infection Prevention and Control of SARS-CoV-2 Variants of Concern for Health Care Settings](#) for more information.

- Ensure that there is sufficient space that is dedicated for specimen collection.
  - This space should be designed to minimize contact between the specimen collection area and the rest of the commercial area through the use of plexiglass barriers or other physical barriers/markers (e.g. private rooms).
  - Pharmacies must have a separate, designated area for COVID-19 specimen collection, which is separate from areas for medication dispensation and flu/vaccine shot clinics occurring concurrently, to minimize congregation of people in the store.
    - If the space for COVID-19 specimen collection is being used for other activities (e.g. counselling, flu shots) the area must be cleaned and disinfected between each use.
    - The space should be designed such that physical distancing of 2 metres between patients/customers is maintained at all times if possible.

## 6. Testing Appointment Times

- Minimize the need for patients and other visitors to wait for testing by booking appointments in advance for on-site specimen collection. Patients do not need an appointment to pick up or drop off samples for self-collection.
- Patients must be informed to arrive no more than 5 minutes prior to their scheduled appointment time and to wait outside the pharmacy until their appointment time.
  - Avoid queuing. If queuing is necessary, physical markers should be placed in a dedicated and separate waiting area or line up to support physical distancing.
- Adequate time should be included between individuals being tested to allow for cleaning and to avoid queuing.

## 7. Hand Hygiene

- Practice frequent hand hygiene. Alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) stations should be readily available at the entrance as well as inside the specimen collection area to promote hand hygiene.

- Health care providers and workers should perform frequent hand hygiene with soap and water or ABHR (minimum 70% alcohol) for a minimum of 15 seconds.
- Hand hygiene should be performed before putting on personal protective equipment (PPE) for specimen collection and after taking off PPE.
- If hands are visibly soiled, hand washing with soap and water must be performed prior to applying alcohol-based hand rub.

## 8. Use of Personal Protective Equipment

- Personal protective equipment (PPE) is intended to protect the wearer by reducing the person's risk of exposure to the virus. All individuals who will be participating in the specimen collection process must wear appropriate PPE for their activities. For the individual collecting specimens, this means PPE for Droplet/Contact Precautions which include:
  - Surgical/procedure mask (medical mask);
  - Eye protection (i.e. face shields, goggles);
  - Gloves; and
  - Gown.
- N95 respirators are not required for specimen collection.
- Pharmacies should assess the availability of PPE and other infection prevention and control supplies that are used for the safe management of suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases. Pharmacies must secure and sustain a supply of PPE that can support their current and ongoing operations. If pharmacies do not have adequate PPE supply, they must not conduct COVID-19 specimen collection and should refer individuals for testing at an alternate designated testing centre.
- Individuals (e.g. health care providers, other workers as required) who will require the use of PPE must be provided with appropriate PPE and be trained at regular intervals, in its proper use, care, and limitations, including donning (putting on), doffing (taking off) and safe disposal. Pharmacy staff should also be trained in the care of and limitations of PPE.

- Please see Public Health Ontario's [Recommended Steps for Putting On and Taking Off Personal Protective Equipment](#) for information on the proper use of PPE.
  - Detailed precautions for staff, by activity and procedure, are listed in PHO's Technical Brief on [IPAC Recommendations for Use of Personal Protective Equipment for Care of Individuals with Suspect or Confirmed COVID-19](#).
- Cross-contamination between clean and soiled PPE (such as during storage, putting on/removing, and the use of PPE) must be avoided.
- PPE should be changed between patients and disposed of properly after use. [Eye protection](#) may be reused after it has been [properly cleaned](#) and disinfected.

## COVID-19 Vaccination

- Pharmacists, health care providers and all pharmacy staff are strongly recommended to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in order to protect pharmacy visitors and patients.
- Pharmacists and health care providers should consider discussions of vaccine status with patients and, where possible and appropriate, offer COVID-19 vaccinations.
- See [COVID-19 vaccines and workplace health and safety](#) for more information.

## Screening and Triaging

This section applies to patient and worker screening to assess an individual for symptoms and COVID-19 exposure history in order to determine their risk of having COVID-19.

## Passive Screening

- Signage should outline signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and indicate that individuals are expected to wear a mask for the entirety of their visit at the pharmacy.
- Symptomatic individuals should be restricted to entering and leaving the pharmacy solely for the purpose of getting a COVID-19 test.
- Individuals who are not being tested should not enter the pharmacy if they are experiencing symptoms.
- A list of COVID-19 symptoms, can be found in the [COVID-19 Reference Document for Symptoms](#).
- Signage should be posted at all entrances of the pharmacy and at triage areas, which prompts individuals arriving for testing to report to a specific location or person.

## Active Screening for Patients<sup>1</sup>

- Appointments for COVID-19 on-site pharmacy testing must be booked in advance. Patients should be screened over the phone, or online with a suitable online screening tool such as the [Self-Assessment Tool](#), for symptoms of COVID-19 and exposure history when scheduling COVID-19 testing appointments.
- All patients (and those accompanying them, if applicable) must be actively screened<sup>1</sup> again when they arrive for testing to assess for symptoms and exposure history.
  - The [COVID-19 Patient Screening Guidance](#) document can be used as a tool to guide active screening activities and can be adapted as needed.
  - Staff should ideally be behind a barrier to protect them from contact/droplet spread during active screening. If a plexiglass barrier is not available, staff should maintain a 2-metre distance from the patient with universal masking. Screeners who do not have a barrier and cannot maintain a 2-metre distance should use Droplet and Contact Precautions. This includes the following PPE: gloves, isolation gown, a surgical/procedure mask, and eye protection (goggles or face shield).

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<sup>1</sup> Active screening is the process of answering a set of screening questions to determine a person's risk of having COVID-19.

## Screening for Workers

- All health care providers and workers who work at pharmacies must be [actively screened](#)<sup>1</sup> every day before entering the workplace.
- Pharmacies should instruct all workers and volunteers to self-monitor for COVID-19 symptoms at home and not come to work if they are feeling ill.
- Any employee who screens positive must alert their employer in accordance with their workplace policy, exclude themselves from work, and consider seeking medical care including COVID-19 testing as appropriate.

## Positive Patient Screening: What to do

- A patient who screens positive for symptoms of COVID-19 online or over the phone while booking an appointment should still be offered a testing appointment, and proper precautions including Droplet and Contact Precautions as outlined above should be followed.
- Patients with severe symptoms (e.g. severe difficulty breathing, severe chest pain, losing consciousness, feeling confused about where they are, etc.) should be directed to the emergency department or instructed to call 911 if needed.
- When a patient arrives at the pharmacy, they must be provided with a surgical/procedure mask (if not already wearing one) and placed in a room with the door closed. They should be encouraged to practice respiratory etiquette, use tissues when needed with access to a waste receptacle, and provided with alcohol-based hand rub. Ensure that patients understand that they should dispose of tissues properly and should not take their masks off at any time except when briefly being tested.
- If it is not possible to move a patient from the waiting area to an available testing room, the patient should be instructed to return outside (e.g. to outside the pharmacy in their vehicle or in the pharmacy parking lot, if available and appropriate) and informed that they will be texted or called when a room becomes available. Symptomatic patients must not be cohorted together; rather, each symptomatic patient must be isolated individually unless they are from the same household.

- Measures should be taken as much as possible to separate those who have screened positive for COVID-19 from those who have screened negative. For example, those who have screened positive must avoid contact with others in common areas of the pharmacy (e.g., waiting area).
- For patients who screen positive, patient contact surfaces (i.e., areas within 2 metres of the patient) should be disinfected as soon as possible. Testing areas, including all horizontal surfaces, and any equipment used on the screen positive patient MUST be cleaned and disinfected before another patient is brought into the testing area or used on another patient.

## Specimen Collection Requirements

### Before Specimen Collection

- Pharmacies are responsible for procuring the necessary equipment and supplies to support their current and ongoing operations.
- COVID-19 PCR specimen collection must be performed using appropriate specimen collection kits approved by Health Canada. All specimen collection kits must be used, processed, and interpreted in compliance with the manufacturer's instructions.
  - See [Public Health Ontario's website](#) for approved specimen collection kits available in Ontario.
- Pharmacies must hire or employ regulated health professionals (e.g. doctors, nurse practitioners or pharmacists) who have within their scope of practice the training and competency to collect specimens for PCR testing and provide oversight, supervision, and specimen collection delivery as required.
- Pharmacies are responsible for partnering with a designated laboratory to process the collected specimen as necessary.
  - Partnering laboratories must be licensed under the [Laboratory and Specimen Collection Centre Licensing Act \(LSCCLA\)](#).

### During Specimen Collection

- On arrival to their appointment, patients must be actively screened prior to entry (see above).

- Appropriate patient information must be collected, and verified when possible, prior to collection, including the patient's name, date of birth, address, specimen collection date, and contact information (phone number).
  - All personal health information must be collected, stored, used, disclosed, and protected in accordance with relevant legislation, including the [Personal Health Information Protection Act \(PHIPA\)](#).
- A COVID-19 test requires collecting a single upper respiratory tract specimen. Accepted specimen types include nasopharyngeal, combined throat and both anterior nasal, combined buccal and deep nasal, deep nasal, anterior nasal, throat swab, or saliva. See Public Health Ontario's [list of specimen types](#) for COVID-19 for more information.
  - As per the [Regulated Health Professions Act](#), pharmacists are not authorized to collect any specimens where doing so involves a controlled act such as putting an instrument beyond the point in the nasal passages where they normally narrow (i.e., nasopharyngeal swabbing).
  - The type of specimen collected will depend on the partner laboratory receiving and processing these specimens. Please confirm with the lab which types of specimens they can process.
- Specimens collected must be placed in a biohazard bag with the [completed COVID-19 virus test requisition form](#) placed in the attached pouch so that the form is not exposed to the specimen. It is recommended that the swab container be pre-labelled so that once the specimen is collected, the container can be gently dropped into the bag without further handling.

### **After Specimen Collection**

- Pharmacies are responsible for storing and transporting the specimen to a licensed laboratory for processing.
  - Specimens should be placed in a biohazard bag and sealed to prevent leakage. Specimens should be stored at 2-8°C following collection and shipped to the laboratory on ice packs. If transport of specimen to testing laboratory will be delayed more than 72 hours, specimens should be frozen at -70°C or below and shipped on dry ice.

- Specimens are not to be stored in a refrigerator that is used for the purpose of storing food and drink for workers, or other medications/vaccines.
- Pharmacies must have a systematic procedure in place to provide follow up on test results and communicate them to the patients.
- The patient must be provided clear instructions on how to obtain their test results, either via a phone call from the pharmacy or [online](#).
- In the event of a **positive test**, the pharmacy must follow up with the patient immediately to inform them of the result. The pharmacy should inform their patient that the local public health unit will be in contact with them shortly and that they should self-isolate immediately and seek medical care with their primary care provider, Telehealth or at an emergency department if needed. Household members and other close contacts of the individual who tested positive should seek COVID-19 testing, and if they are not fully vaccinated they are also required to self-isolate. See the [COVID-19 Management of Cases and Contacts in Ontario](#) and the [COVID-19 Fully Vaccinated Individuals: Case, Contact and Outbreak Management Interim Guidance](#) for more information.
- COVID-19 is a designated disease of public health significance ([O. Reg. 135/18](#)) and is thus reportable under the [Health Protection and Promotion Act \(HPPA\)](#). Pharmacies and their partner laboratories are required to report all PCR positive results to their [local public health unit](#).

In the event that the case resides in a jurisdiction that is different from where the pharmacy is located, the report must be made to the local public health unit in which the individual with the positive result resides.

- In the event that a COVID-19 specimen is not tested due to storage, transportation or other issue, the pharmacy must:
  - Follow up with the patient to inform them that their specimen was not tested and provide them with advice on whether a repeat specimen should be collected; and
  - Dispose of the COVID-19 specimen as biomedical waste in accordance with provincial regulations and local bylaws.

## Occupational Health and Safety

- Under Ontario's labour laws, employers must take every reasonable precaution to protect the health and safety of workers. This includes protecting workers from hazards posed by infectious diseases, such as COVID-19.
- Employers should implement a variety of measures to control potential COVID-19 exposures. Examples include screening, physical distancing and barriers, good ventilation, frequent cleaning and disinfection of surfaces, source control masking and, where needed, personal protective equipment. In situations where one or more controls cannot be consistently maintained, it is especially important that other controls are in place.
- COVID-19 guidance for employers and workers is available on the Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development's COVID-19 [website](#). This website includes resources to help employers develop a COVID-19 workplace safety plan and implement control measures suited to their situation. Many of the controls used to prevent transmission of the virus are the same for workers and members of the public.
- Pharmacies should have written measures and procedures for worker health and safety, developed in consultation with the joint health and safety committee or health and safety representative including measures and procedures for infection prevention and control and disposal of biomedical waste.
- If an employer is advised that one of their workers has tested positive for COVID-19 due to exposure at the workplace, or that a claim has been filed for an occupational illness with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), the employer must give notice in writing within four days to:
  - the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development
  - the workplace's joint health and safety committee or a health and safety representative
  - the worker's trade union (if applicable)
- Additionally, employers must report any occupationally acquired illness to the WSIB within three days of learning about it.