

Ministry of Health

# COVID-19 Guidance: Testing of Asymptomatic Persons in Pharmacies

November 9, 2020

This document is intended for pharmacies that will be facilitating COVID-19 specimen collection as per the provincial guidance for asymptomatic individuals eligible for testing within the publicly funded health care system in Ontario.

Individuals who are symptomatic, have been identified as a high risk contact of a known COVID-19 case, have traveled outside Canada in the last 14 days, and/or have previously tested positive must NOT be tested at pharmacies and should be directed to [COVID-19 Assessment Centres](#).

**Low risk asymptomatic individuals should NOT be considered for COVID-19 testing. [Please see the COVID-19 test and testing location information for more detail.](#)**

**In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, there are strategies in place to prioritize testing and [conserve personal protective equipment and other health care supplies](#) as required. Specimen collection of individuals at pharmacies should not supersede, impede, or delay testing of high risk individuals, including those identified as being part of a COVID-19 outbreak investigation.**

This document is not intended to provide public health advice on any operational aspects of these pharmacies beyond asymptomatic COVID-19 testing. For more sector specific information, please refer to the Ministry of Health's [COVID-19 Community Pharmacies](#) and [COVID-19 Operational Requirements: Health Sector Restart documents](#).

This guidance document provides basic information only. It is not intended to take the place of medical advice, diagnosis, treatment, or legal advice. In the event of a conflict between this guidance document and any applicable legislation, 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.

## Health and Safety Requirements

All pharmacies are expected to implement and follow general infection prevention and control measures to help protect their workers, patients, and customers against COVID-19. In general, it is recommended that all individuals visiting the pharmacies, including health care providers, workers, customers, and other visitors:

- Practice physical distancing. Pharmacies should ensure that there is enough space on their premises to follow physical distancing guidelines of maintaining at least 2 metres from other people.
  - Consider ways to minimize traffic flow throughout the retail space (e.g. physical markings, limiting capacity inside the store, creating unidirectional flow, etc.).
- Use masks or face coverings. All individuals (and those accompanying them, if applicable) visiting, including for asymptomatic COVID-19 specimen collection, should [wear a mask or face covering](#).
  - Individuals should wear an appropriate [face covering/mask](#) in compliance with local public health advice or municipal bylaws.
  - Reasonable exceptions include children under the age of two, those with a medical condition, or those who are unable to remove the mask without assistance. Medical notes or proof are not required or recommended.
  - Any appropriate mask worn by a health care provider or other worker as PPE (e.g. surgical or procedure mask, medical mask) meets the requirement to wear a face covering.
- 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.

- Perform routine environmental cleaning. All common areas should be regularly cleaned and disinfected (e.g., minimum daily) 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 and 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 all 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](#) for more information.
- Post [signage](#) promoting public health measures at the entrance of the pharmacy. Include direction on not entering the premises if they have [signs and symptoms of COVID-19](#), contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19, or have traveled outside of Canada in the past 14 days. Signage should also include messaging on the importance of proper [hand hygiene](#), [physical distancing](#), [face covering/masks](#), and [respiratory etiquette](#).

**In addition, pharmacies, their health care providers, and other staff that plan to participate in asymptomatic COVID-19 specimen collection must also consider and implement the measures discussed below.**

### **Physical environment**

- 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. counselling rooms).
  - Pharmacies should have separate, designated areas for medication dispensation, flu shot clinics, and COVID-19 specimen collection to minimize congregations of people in the store. This space could also be used for other activities (e.g. counselling, flu shots) once the area is cleaned and disinfected.

- Consider what tasks can be done to minimize staff interactions with each other 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 workers to customer) or masks are worn when this is not possible.
- The space should be designed such that physical distancing of 2 metres between patients/customers is maintained at all times.
- Minimize the need for patients and other visitors to wait for testing by booking appointments in advance for specimen collection and not permitting walk-in appointments.
  - Consider asking patients to show up no more than 5 minutes prior to their scheduled appointment time and using physical markers where patients may need to form a queue to receive services.

## 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 must be performed before putting on personal protective equipment (PPE) for specimen collection and before and after taking off PPE.
- If hands are visibly soiled, hand washing with soap and water must be performed prior to applying alcohol-based rub.

## 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 normally required in pharmacies.

- Pharmacies must secure and sustain a supply of PPE that can support their current and ongoing operations.
- 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 in its proper use, care and limitation including donning, doffing and safe disposal.
- 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.
- Cross-contamination between clean and soiled PPE (such as during storage, putting on/removing, and the use of PPE) must be avoided.
- At minimum, gloves and gowns must be changed between patients and disposed of properly after use. [Eye protection](#) may be reused after it has been properly cleaned and disinfected. All PPE should be changed when it becomes damp, torn, or visibly soiled.
  - As a contingency strategy, pharmacies may consider adopting [Ontario Health's universal masking conservation strategies](#) for extended use of masks as necessary.

## Screening and Triaging

### Active screening

- Active screening for COVID-19 is intended to assess an individual's symptoms and exposure history in order to determine their risk of having COVID-19. This process includes asking the individual about:
  - [Signs and symptoms of COVID-19](#);
  - Close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19;
  - Whether they are part of an outbreak investigation;
  - Travel outside of Canada in the last 14 days; and/or
  - Whether they have been advised to get tested for COVID-19 by local public health or the COVID Alert app.
- A "yes" to any one of the above results in a **screen positive**.

- Asymptomatic individuals who have previously tested positive for COVID-19 should NOT be re-tested unless directed otherwise by public health. In this case, they should go to a COVID-19 Assessment Centre.

### **Screening for health care providers and workers**

- All health care providers and workers who work at pharmacies must be [actively screened](#) every day before entering the workplace as per [O. Reg 364/20: Rules for Areas in Stage 3](#).
- 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.

### **Screening for patients when scheduling an appointment**

- Appointments must be booked in advance. Patients must be actively screened over the phone, either at the time of booking or after, before their scheduled appointment.
- **If an individual screens positive (answers yes to any of the above questions), they must not be offered an appointment.**
  - Direct them to seek the advice of a health care provider, visit a [COVID-19 Assessment Centre](#), or direct them to the emergency department if medically urgent.
- Ensure that the patients meet the criteria for specimen collection in pharmacies.
  - Low risk, asymptomatic individuals who do not meet the [provincial testing criteria](#) should NOT be tested.
  - Asymptomatic individuals who have previously tested positive for COVID-19 should NOT be re-tested unless directed otherwise by public health. In this case, they should go to a COVID-19 Assessment Centre.

### **Screening patients at the scheduled appointment**

- All patients (and those accompanying them, if applicable) must be actively screened again at the entrance of the pharmacies when they arrive for their appointment.

- Where possible, it is recommended that daily screening be done electronically (e.g., via the [online self-assessment tool](#), survey, or e-mail) on the day of their appointment prior to arrival to the pharmacies.
- If individuals are screened at the pharmacies in person, screeners should take appropriate precautions, including maintaining a distance of at least 2 metres from those being screened or being separated by a physical barrier (such as a plexiglass barrier). If a 2 metre distance or physical distancing cannot be maintained, PPE (i.e., medical mask and eye protection) should be worn.
- Records of the screen for each patient should be kept for a minimum of 30 days or as per the requirements of the respective regulated health profession.
- Pharmacies may only collect specimens from individuals who screen NEGATIVE at the time of scheduling AND on the day of their appointment.
- **All individuals who screen positive must NOT be tested in pharmacies**
  - Provide the individual with a medical mask and direct them to seek medical care as appropriate, visit a COVID-19 assessment centre and self-isolate at home, or direct the individual to the emergency department if medically urgent.

## 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 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 and provide oversight, supervision, and specimen collection delivery as required.

- Pharmacies are responsible for partnering with a private laboratory to process the collected specimen as necessary.
  - Partnering laboratories must be licensed under the [Laboratory and Specimen Collection Centre Licensing Act \(LSCCLA\)](#).
  - Point-of-care or serology (antibody) testing is not permitted.

## During Specimen Collection

- On arrival to their appointment, the patient must be actively screened negative in order to be able to proceed with specimen collection (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, deep nasal, anterior nasal, throat swab, or saliva.
  - Pharmacists must only collect anterior nasal, throat, or combined throat and anterior nasal swabs. As per the [Regulated Health Professions Act](#), pharmacists must NOT collect any specimens where to do so involves putting an instrument beyond the point in the nasal passages where they normally narrow.
  - The type of specimen collected will depend on the partner laboratory receiving and processing these specimens. Please confirm with the lab as to 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 once the swab is obtained.
- The patient does not need to self-isolate at home following the specimen collection but should be advised to self-monitor for symptoms as appropriate.



## 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 patient should be informed:
  - Of their positive result;
  - That they must self-isolate immediately;
  - To alert their close contacts to self-isolate;
  - To seek medical care with their primary care provider or Telehealth, or at an emergency department as appropriate; and
  - That they will be followed up by their local public health unit, whose advice they must follow.
- 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.

- 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 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.

## Occupational Health and Safety

- The OHSA requires employers to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker. This requirement applies to all Ontario workplaces at all times and includes the need to put controls in place to protect workers from infectious disease hazards 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 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, 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 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, any occupationally acquired illnesses must be reported to the WSIB within three days of receiving notification of the illness.