

DATE: September 9th, 2021

SUBJECT: Direction for Implementing Updated Provincial Testing Guidance

Several updates have recently been made to provincial guidance documents to ensure appropriate and easy access to testing and to revise eligibility for asymptomatic, lab-based PCR testing, as a result of [Directive #6](#), which was publicly announced on August 17th 2021, and other provincially-led vaccine policies. These recent changes do not impact the current eligibility criteria for symptomatic individuals seeking a diagnostic test at a designated testing centre, which remains unchanged.

Recent changes to the [COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance](#) and [COVID-19 Guidance: Considerations for Antigen Point-of-Care Testing](#) are outlined below. Guidance is implemented at designated testing centres, such as assessment centres, community sites, and community lab specimen collection centres.

1. Updates to Provincial Testing Guidance and Antigen Point-of-Care Testing Guidance

Key changes to guidance include:

Ensuring a Range of Preferred Specimen Collection Types

- The revised [COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance](#) references access to less invasive specimen collection approaches. This represents a critical factor for supporting access to testing, particularly for non-hospitalized patients and asymptomatic persons that are eligible for provincially-funded testing.
- In addition to nasopharyngeal swabs, assessment centres **must therefore routinely offer at least one more preferred method of specimen collection** to non-hospitalized patients and asymptomatic persons that are eligible for provincially funded testing.

A list of preferred methods of specimen collection types can be found on the [Public Health Ontario website](#), and includes (but is not limited to): combined swab of throat and both nares, combined oral (buccal) and deep nasal swab, and deep nasal swab.

Ensuring Access to Testing for School and Child Care-Aged Children

- School-aged and childcare-aged children should be offered access to rapid molecular tests (e.g. ID NOW), where available, to minimize time away from school while waiting for test results.
- Consistent with the direction above regarding the range of preferred specimen collection types to be offered, **less invasive specimen collection approaches must also be made available for school-aged and childcare-aged children.**

Enhanced Access to Rapid Molecular Testing (e.g., ID NOW)

- A positive antigen point-of-care test or a positive molecular self-test (e.g., Lucira) can now be confirmed by using a rapid molecular test (e.g., ID NOW) as long as a positive molecular test can be reported into the Ontario Laboratories Information System (OLIS). A negative rapid molecular test result following a positive antigen point-of-care test or molecular self-test still requires lab-based PCR testing. Please refer to provincial guidance on [how to interpret confirmatory test results](#).
 - Those with a preliminary positive result using self-testing devices available for purchase privately (e.g., Lucira) require a confirmatory lab-based PCR test or a confirmatory rapid molecular test (e.g., ID NOW).

Reduced Eligibility Criteria for Provincially Funded Asymptomatic Lab-Based PCR Testing

- Eligibility for provincially funded lab-based PCR testing for asymptomatic individuals (i.e., individuals who have no symptoms and who have not been identified as a high-risk/close contact of a confirmed case) has been reduced. Individuals and/or populations who remain eligible for free asymptomatic testing include:
 - Workers (including support workers), visitors (including caregivers) and government inspectors of long-term care homes;
 - Temporary Foreign Workers, for the purposes of international travel;
 - Individuals who identify as Indigenous;
 - Individuals, and one accompanying caregiver, with written prior approval for out-of-country medical services from the General Manager, OHIP;
 - Individuals who are travelling into remote/isolated First Nation and Indigenous communities for work purposes.

Eligibility Criteria for Provincially Funded Lab-Based PCR Testing

- The following individuals/populations remain eligible for free lab-based PCR testing at provincial testing centres:
 - Individuals with any symptom of COVID-19 that is new, worsening or different from an individual's baseline health status (usual state), and is listed in the current [Reference Document for Symptoms](#), i.e., fever/chills, cough, shortness of breath, new olfactory or taste disorder, fatigue/lethargy/malaise, myalgias, nausea/vomiting diarrhea, sore throat, rhinorrhea (runny nose), nasal congestion, abdominal pain, headache, conjunctivitis, or decreased appetite or lack of appetite for young children.
 - High-risk/close contacts of a confirmed case who are asymptomatic should undergo PCR testing at a designated testing centre as soon as possible and on or after day 7 of their last exposure or notification from the COVID Alert app (regardless of vaccination status and requirement to self-isolate).
 - Individuals in the context of an outbreak, should follow as directed by the local public health unit.

2. Provincial Vaccine Policies (e.g., Directive #6)

Provincial vaccine policies (e.g., Directive #6) require individuals in certain high-risk settings to undertake regular antigen testing if they do not provide proof of full vaccination against COVID-19. Please note the following in relation to provincial vaccine policies:

- **Any screening testing required to comply with a provincial vaccine policy (e.g., Directive #6) must be done using rapid antigen tests, and not PCR or rapid molecular tests.**
 - Added pressure on the province's specimen collection capacity caused by screening testing could lead to delays in the collection of samples for symptomatic and high-risk contacts, which could delay the overall time it takes people to get tested and receive results, thereby imposing risk to the province's public health response.
 - Assessment Centre capacity is a provincial resource. Assessment Centre capacity should not be made available to hospital staff and other identified groups to meet asymptomatic testing requirements.
 - Rapid molecular devices, such as ID NOW, should not be used to meet the testing requirements within a vaccine policy, except as a confirmatory test on a positive antigen test result.
- Rapid antigen screening tests are available for all eligible organizations (including those overseen by provincially-led vaccine policies), for free, through the [Provincial Antigen Screening Program](#).

Additional Updates:

- Testing should also not be provided to individuals seeking 'clearance' for travel or attending sports/entertainment venues and events.
- Assessment Centres should continue to assess the reason for testing to determine the appropriate use of resources.

Additional Resources

The Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH) has released the updated [COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance](#) and the [COVID-19 Guidance: Considerations for Antigen Point-of-Care Testing](#) to reflect the changes noted above.

Updates to the Ontario Together website and Ontario.ca will also be made.

Key Contact Information

For questions about the COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance or Directive #6, please contact the Ministry of Health, Emergency Operations Centre by way of email to:
EOOperations.MOH@ontario.ca

Sincerely,



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