

COVID-19 Testing and Isolation Recommendation Changes

Several updates will be announced by Alberta Health today (March 21) as the province works to bring COVID-19 management more in line with other respiratory illnesses.

As of April 1, 2023, rapid antigen tests (RATs) will be the recommended COVID-19 tests for most Albertans. Alberta Health Services (AHS) Assessment Centres, which currently offer molecular testing to certain eligible Albertans, including healthcare workers, will close on March 31, 2023.

This change affects primary care providers' own access to molecular tests as well as their patients' access. Primary care providers, their staff, and their patients should only have molecular testing when needed to support their clinical care. A positive RAT is all that is required to access treatments like [Paxlovid™ or Remdesivir](#), but molecular testing can be used for high-risk patients with negative RAT results and urgency in ruling out COVID-19 (e.g., during pregnancy) if it's decided not to begin therapy while awaiting the result of a second RAT at least 24 hours later.

Naso-pharyngeal/throat swab samples can be collected in primary care offices. Primary care providers can use current processes to order testing supplies. They can submit specimens to the lab using this form: [COVID-19 and Other Respiratory Viruses Requisition \(Provincial\) \(albertahealthservices.ca\)](#). Molecular testing will also continue to be available, based on clinical relevance, at acute care sites, and through emergency medical services. Health Link triage nurses (at the 811 number) will also continue to triage Albertans for the testing that best suits their situation.

RATs are available for the public free of charge at pharmacies across Alberta. Primary care providers can continue to access RATs free of charge from AHS by using the [COVID-19 Rapid Antigen Test Requisition](#) form.

For more information, see [AHS's guidance on viral respiratory illnesses for community providers](#) and the [guidance summary](#). These documents will be updated shortly with the changes noted here.

Isolation and masking recommendations

Effective April 1, the previously recommended minimum isolation period of five days for people with COVID-19 symptoms or a positive COVID-19 test will no longer be required by Alberta Health in public settings. Those with respiratory virus symptoms or who test positive for any respiratory illness should stay home until all symptoms have improved, they feel well enough to resume normal activities, and they have been fever-free for 24 hours without using fever-reducing medications.

Anyone who has respiratory virus symptoms should wear a mask for a total of 10 days from the onset of symptoms (even if the symptoms have resolved or improved) when in indoor settings with other individuals.

How will these changes affect primary care providers?

The impact on primary care providers will be minimal because of the following factors:

- RATs have been the recommended testing approach for the public for several months
- New guidance makes RATs the go-to test for COVID-19
- Demand for molecular testing at assessment centres has been low for several months

Nevertheless, primary care providers may receive new testing requests from patients after the Assessment Centres close on March 31. Those patients may best be served by testing with a RAT, or they can be swabbed in the primary care provider's office for a molecular test, or they can be referred to Health Link at 811.

In addition, primary care providers will no longer be able to offer patients requisitions for molecular testing through an AHS Assessment Center, and self-referred testing will no longer be available. AHS will no longer provide test results or recommendations by text or autodialer to any patients, but results will continue to be available on the [My Health Alberta website](#).

Bivalent booster program

Alberta Health, with guidance from the Alberta Advisory Committee on Immunization is recommending an additional bivalent booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine for Albertans at higher risk of severe outcomes. Eligible Albertans can book a booster as of April 3. Outreach immunization will also begin toward the end of March for residents in seniors congregate living facilities.

Additional booster doses may be recommended for broader population groups in the fall of 2023, depending on the COVID-19 pandemic context.

AHS and Alberta Health will continue to monitor the need for testing throughout the province and will adjust the testing strategy as needed.

For more information

See the [Alberta Health COVID-19](#) page for details on booster eligibility and isolation recommendations. It will be updated shortly with the news above.

Also see [AHS's guidance on viral respiratory illnesses for community providers](#) and the [guidance summary](#). These documents will be updated shortly with the changes noted above.

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