

# Pandemic RESPONSE

## COVID-19 in the Calgary Zone: PCN update #14 – June 17, 2020

Dear colleagues, PCN staff and teams,

Alberta's state of emergency officially ended earlier this week, but the challenges faced by primary care continue to loom large as the second stage of the relaunch strategy gathers pace.

Of all the issues faced by clinics, physicians, teams and PCNs over the past few months, personal protective equipment has been one of the most difficult and contentious. Primary care played a key role in the pandemic response in the Calgary Zone but questions about access to PPE and the related cost presented significant risk to physicians' ability to continue to see patients in-person and to be at the forefront of the response.

The announcement that Alberta Health Services has offered to supply family physicians with PPE on a cost-recovery basis allows physicians to source from a single provider that can procure and maintain supplies in bulk. While we believe this offers some certainty to clinics, it's far from a perfect solution.

We understand and share the concerns expressed about the cost of PPE at a time when clinic revenue has dropped sharply. PCNs are also facing significant additional and unexpected costs as they facilitate ordering and distribution. Behind the scenes, difficult conversations continue about how best to ensure physicians and clinic staff have access to the PPE they need to provide safe and effective care. Your local PCN will be in touch in the coming days to confirm if there are any changes to ordering processes and procedures.

Related to this, more details are expected to be released soon about a new government grant program that would allow small businesses to apply to offset PPE costs. We will share those details as soon as they are available. We're told PPE arrangements will also be reviewed in the event of a second wave of COVID-19. Thank you once again for your commitment to your patients as we continue to work on this difficult issue.

Yours sincerely,



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## Medical Home Q&A, with Dr. Christine Luelo

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**Q. What changes will you be making to your practice in light of the government requiring family physicians to pay for PPE?**

I have been accused of wearing rose-coloured glasses, but I see the stability of AHS procurement, coupled with PCN distribution, as a win for community practice, notwithstanding the cost. In my office we require all patients to be masked for appointments to help protect other patients and our team. We are updating our website with details on “how to prepare for your visit to see your doctor” and are working on processes to push emails to patients with this advice, as well as to cut down on phone time. All patients are expected to wear a reusable non-medical mask they bring themselves (a Stampede bandana works. What Calgarian doesn't have one of those?). They are also given the option of borrowing one of our cloth masks free of charge (I'm on laundry duty once a week) or purchasing a mask at cost recovery from our stockpile (now that we have to pay for them). Patients who refuse to wear a mask are rebooked for a virtual visit, during which we can negotiate the next steps for care. Alberta Health has advised that physicians will be eligible for a grant program for small businesses to help offset PPE costs but details are yet to be released. [AHS PPE price list](#) | [AHS PPE memo \(includes PPE specifications\)](#) | [Provincial Operations Centre](#) | [Alberta Biz Connect](#) | [PPE guidelines](#) | [Business continuity](#)

**Q. What options do clinics and physicians have regarding patient masking, particularly for those without ILI symptoms?**

All healthcare providers in direct patient care sites should be adopting the continuous masking recommendations and wearing a procedure mask at all times. Patients who are asymptomatic should wear a mask as a risk-reduction strategy if physical distancing is not possible -- i.e. for all visits to your office. If you need to see an asymptomatic patient who is in isolation due to contact with a known case, treat them as symptomatic. All symptomatic patients should be given a procedure mask (more effective at reducing transmission) from your supplies and any health care worker in direct contact with the patient should be wearing full PPE. [Masking guidance](#) | [Continuous masking: Healthcare settings](#) | [PPE info](#)

**Q. What should Stage 2 of the reopening look like in our offices?**

With the reopening of personal services and leisure activities, there is a desire for more in-person care. However, it's not back to business as usual. Be creative with your schedule and opening hours to allow for the spreading out of patients. Perhaps it's time to think about introducing more evening or weekend hours. Think about how your work in the next few months will impact your fall schedule. For example, I am bringing patients in for face-to-face appointments now to get blood pressure and other items completed. In the event of a second wave those patients may not need me for routine care. This approach has the benefit of hopefully reducing my PPE needs in the fall. If we don't get a second wave I will get some time off! Whatever changes you make, think carefully about how you could pivot back to Stage 1, if needed. Write the plan down and keep your staff informed. [Stage 1 visit pathway](#) | [COVID-19 primary care pathway](#) | [Hospital discharge pathway](#) | [Relaunch checklist](#) | [Evidence: Virtual care](#)

**Q. Is there anywhere I can find support to brainstorm my clinic plans?**

We are collaborating at the Zone level to create a community of practice for family physicians to virtually meet and talk about their ideas and feel more connected with their colleagues. We hope this will be

helpful even after the pandemic passes (wearing those rose-coloured glasses again!). Stay tuned for practical tips as we continue to meet and share ideas. [Calgary Zone pandemic response article](#) | [Canadian Medical Association: Virtual care survey results](#)

## Other updates

### 1 Specialist LINK: By the numbers

Family doctors turned to Specialist LINK in record numbers last year as the service experienced an unprecedented surge in growth and popularity. Tele-advice requests, pathway downloads and visits to [specialistlink.ca](https://specialistlink.ca) all soared in the 12 months from April 2019 to March 2020. [Click here](#) or the image at right to download our annual 'by the numbers' report. [Full 2019-20 annual report](#). Highlights include:

- 10,640 tele-advice calls, a 65% increase compared to 2018-19
- Following tele-advice, 7,129 patients no longer needed a consultation with a specialist, a jump of 146%
- 4,894 patients avoided a visit to the emergency department, (+322%)
- Tele-advice projected net system savings of \$1.57 million last year (+206%)
- Website views rose 23% and pathway downloads were up 34%



### 2 Respiriology tele-advice: Time change

New operating hours are in effect for respirology, one of the most popular tele-advice services available via Specialist LINK. It will be available weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., instead of the previous closing time of 5 p.m. Respirology joins chronic pain, child and adolescent psychiatry and geriatric psychiatry in closing at 4 p.m. All other services are open until 5 p.m. COVID tele-advice is also available weekends, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. To request tele-advice, go to [specialistlink.ca](https://specialistlink.ca) or call 403-910-2551.

### 3 Connect Care work resumes

Planning for the next waves of Connect Care implementation has resumed. Wave 3, which includes the Calgary Zone, is now due to be launched in February 2021. Please review the [updated timeline](#).

### 4 Webinars: Preparing for a second wave of COVID-19; Chronic Pain

Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Deena Hinshaw is the guest speaker for an upcoming University of Calgary COVID Corner webinar. Dr. Hinshaw will discuss lessons learned from the last three months and look ahead to the potential for a second wave. It will take place Wednesday, June 24, from 7-9 p.m. [Register](#). On Friday, June 26 at 10 a.m., Alberta Pain Strategy presents a two-hour [livestream](#) on Let's Talk About My Pain: An Interdisciplinary Session for People Living with Pain during COVID-19.

### 5 rTMS clinic accepting referrals

The Calgary Zone's Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (rTMS) clinic is accepting referrals once again. Staff are also in the process of sorting through existing referrals that were suspended in the spring. rTMS was featured in a PCN webinar in March. [Dr. Lisa Harpur presentation](#) | [rTMS resources](#)

### 6 FIT testing resumes

Fecal Immunochemical testing for colorectal cancer screening has resumed. [FIT testing memo](#)