

COVID-19 in the Calgary Zone: PCN update — Sept. 3, 2021

Medical Home Q&A with Dr. Christine Luelo

Q. Surging case numbers and the lifting of restrictions are creating huge anxiety for my clinic staff and colleagues as we head into fall. What can we do to reassure staff?

Just when we thought we could raise our heads, the fourth wave arrived. It has been a real disappointment, to say the least. I would like to thank the physicians currently advocating on behalf of primary care, who are trying to ensure our input and experience are leveraged for decision making. Take a moment to thank someone you work with today — an act of gratitude can be so uplifting for both the giver and the receiver. Find something that gives you joy in your day, no matter how small. Our webinar series, which was so well-attended over the past 18 months, resumes on Monday, September 13. I hope it still resonates as just-in-time, pragmatic advice to help you feel more prepared to face upcoming challenges. [Register: PCN webinar](#) | [Physician and Family Support Program](#) | [Help in tough times](#)

Q. Given the expected surge in seasonal illnesses in the coming months, what is your clinic doing to manage infection control as symptomatic patients request appointments?

In retrospect, I realize I was under-utilizing personal protective equipment before the pandemic. Why wasn't I masking up when a patient came in with flu-like symptoms? Why didn't I wear a mask more often when my patients came in with incidental coughs and colds? Why did we all just accept that we would get sick all winter? I can safely say that my hyper-vigilance during COVID-19 has taught me something.

We will be using our upcoming webinar to share examples of how to approach infection control this fall. We are also closely watching provincial guidance that is currently being drafted and will clarify the role of point-of-care testing and swabbing in primary care. We recognize that with schools starting up, flu season around the corner, flu shots rolling out and hopefully COVID-19 vaccines for five-to-12 year olds, there will be a need to rapidly adapt our guidance and communicate that to you. If you haven't already checked it out, I highly recommend [The Cold Standard](#) (from Choosing Wisely Canada). We shared this document with our staff to help them feel more prepared for booking decisions in our clinic. [Back to school tool kit](#)

Q. What is happening about point-of-care testing being available in primary care at the end of September? How will this work and what are the implications for clinics?

While there are ongoing advocacy efforts and conversations on the overall testing strategy, there is also a recognition that making plans for a time without mass testing is prudent. If we do shift away from mass testing, there are plans to make point-of-care testing available to clinics that want to have the option. The idea is that it would help to inform care decisions for individual patients, not act as a replacement for Alberta Health Services sites. Watch this space for updates.

Q. I'm starting to be inundated with requests to write vaccine exemption letters, particularly for young people. How are you dealing with these?

In response to this very big question, we put together a [document](#) outlining advice or options for various stakeholder groups. It was compiled with input from our medical directors and other primary care leaders. We hope you will find answers here to this common and timely question: [COVID-19 Vaccine Medical Exemptions for Primary Care](#) | [Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops statement](#)

Q. If the government goes ahead with the planned testing changes and lifting of isolation rules, what supports are available to help guide patient care? Are the care pathways still relevant?

As mentioned above, we are actively working and collaborating on guidance to support physicians and clinics to manage in an endemic state. We also continue to update the existing COVID-19 management pathways for you to use when you have a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis, or a presumptive diagnosis without testing available. Our goal has remained the same throughout the pandemic — to give you practical advice about managing your patients and your offices. Right now there is too much that is not known about the next steps for public health interventions in the proposed COVID-19 endemic state for us to nail down that advice. Stay tuned! We are also currently finalizing a post-COVID-19 conditions pathway that we expect to publish shortly on [specialistlink.ca](#). [COVID-19 tele-advice](#) | [COVID-19 adult pathway](#) | [COVID-19 pediatric pathway](#) | [Post-COVID-19 resources](#)

Other updates

1 Masking mandate, public health announcements

The Government of Alberta announced a new masking mandate on Friday, September 3, as part of a series of temporary public health measures. [Watch the news conference](#). The measures included:

- Masks are mandatory for all indoor public spaces and workplaces, effective Saturday, September 4. School boards will continue to set their own COVID-19 management policies, as appropriate.
- Restaurants, cafes, bars, pubs and other licensed establishments will be required to end alcohol service at 10 p.m. This is also effective starting Saturday, September 4.
- The province is strongly recommending that unvaccinated Albertans limit indoor social gatherings to close contacts of two cohort families, up to a maximum of 10 people.
- It is also recommended that employers pause plans for staff to return to work and instead continue work from home measures. Employees must mask in all indoor settings, except in work stations or where two-metre physical distancing or barriers are in place.
- All Albertans who receive a first or second dose of COVID-19 vaccine between Friday, September 3 and Thursday, October 14 are eligible to receive a one-time incentive of \$100. After vaccination, Albertans will need to register online on a website that will be available starting Monday, September 13.
- [COVID-19 modelling](#) has also been made available online.

2 PCN webinar series is back!

The Calgary Zone's popular PCN webinar series returns on Monday, September 13. Dr. Luelo and Dr. Rick Ward will lead a panel discussion on the return to school, point-of-care testing, clinic perspectives and managing COVID-19 in the community. Guest speakers will include Dr. Deena Hinshaw, the Chief

Medical Officer of Health. The mental health portion of the webinar includes a presentation on fecal transplants for treatment-resistant depression. [Register](#).

3 Specialist LINK tele-advice options

Maternal fetal medicine obstetrics pandemic support tele-advice has been discontinued due to lack of demand, effective Wednesday, September 1. Maternal fetal medicine tele-advice continues to be available on Specialist LINK. Adult COVID-19 tele-advice is also still available during business hours, from Monday to Friday. Physicians seeking support for non-urgent pediatric COVID-19 advice can contact the on-call specialist at the Alberta Children's Hospital (ask for Pediatric ID) at 403-955-7211. The following Specialist LINK service changes are also in effect:

- General surgery, colorectal surgery and upper GI bariatrics tele-advice are not available in September
- Endocrine surgery, hepatobiliary and surgical oncology tele-advice is still available during business hours

To request tele-advice, visit specialistlink.ca or call 403-910-2551. Tele-advice is available Monday to Friday (except statutory holidays), from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (selected services operate until 4 p.m.) Calls are returned within one hour.

Diabetes foot care pathway: A new care pathway for family physicians has been added to specialistlink.ca and can be [downloaded here](#).

4 Third doses made available

Seniors living in congregate care facilities and immunocompromised Albertans are now eligible to receive third doses of a COVID-19 vaccine. In addition, mRNA doses will be made available to Albertans who have been vaccinated with AstraZeneca or mixed doses and are travelling to a jurisdiction that does not accept the AstraZeneca vaccine or mixed doses as being fully vaccinated. Spacing guidelines are as follows:

- Seniors living in care facilities will be eligible five months after receiving their second dose. They will receive their third dose at their facility.
- Immunocompromised Albertans will be able to receive a third dose eight weeks after their second. Eligible conditions include transplant recipients, those with chronic kidney disease who are receiving regular dialysis, Albertans in active cancer treatment and those on medications for autoimmune diseases
- mRNA doses will be made available at least 28 days after a second dose.

Immunization records are available via [MyHealth Records](#). For more information, read [the bulletin](#).

5 Webinars & events

- On Wednesday, September 8, the University of Calgary's COVID Corner series returns with *Moving into the Grey – The 4th Wave and Beyond*. [Register](#).
- Videos of the *COVID at the Cabin* series are also available online. [Watch the videos](#).
- The College of Family Physicians of Canada is offering a free online COVID-19 learning series. [More information](#).
- On Friday, October 22 and Saturday, October 23, the Alberta College of Family Physicians and PEER team are set to host the 10th annual Practical Evidence for Informed Practice (PEIP) Conference. [More details](#).