

Date:

November 3, 2022

Memo

To: Primary care providers

From: Dr. Elizabeth Muggah, Senior Clinical Advisor, Primary Care

CC: Dr. Sacha Bhatia, Senior Vice President, Population Health and Value-Based Health Systems
Anna Greenberg, Chief Regional Officer, Toronto and East
Susan deRyk, Chief Regional Officer, Central and West
Brian Kytör, Chief Regional Officer, North East and North West

Re: Supports for a challenging fall season

Dear Colleagues,

This is a time of unprecedented challenges for primary care, chief among these the strain on our health human resource capacity. Together with the Ontario Health Regions, and in alignment with the Ministry of Health's provincial priorities, we are committed to driving sustainable changes to support primary care in Ontario.

As we move through the fall, we are seeing an increase in COVID-19 cases and a rise in COVID-19 hospitalizations and intensive care unit admissions. At the same time, rates of other respiratory illnesses, including influenza, are climbing steadily, along with emergency department visits for cough and fever, particularly in children. Over the coming weeks, we anticipate further increases in respiratory illness and additional strain on our health system. With this in mind, we are sharing the following guidance and supports to help you in your work.

Caring for patients with COVID-19 and respiratory infections

- **Prioritizing the primary care of patients with febrile respiratory illnesses** will be crucial to keep them in the community and out of emergency departments. We know your patients trust you and many will want to see you for an in-person assessment, particularly young children, where parents and caregivers may benefit from added reassurance.
- In-person care is necessary in many cases to meet the [standard of care](#) and can be provided safely, even in the absence of a negative test result or vaccination, by taking appropriate IPAC precautions.
 - For guidance on **implementation of IPAC** measures in community practices, review this updated summary from [the Ontario College of Family Physicians](#).
 - **Personal protective equipment** is available through the [provincial stockpile](#) if required.
- **Acetaminophen and ibuprofen supply for pediatric patients** continues to be a problem. Pharmacies can provide alternate options without a prescription (i.e., compounded product, chewable tablets,

suppositories). Review this [information for families and caregivers](#) on children's fever and pain medication, created by pharmacists and children's hospitals.

- Ensure continued communication with patients about your availability and after-hours services. Through **Health Connect Ontario**, patients can access non-urgent health advice from registered nurses 24/7 via telephone (811) or online chat at ontario.ca/HealthConnectOntario. Please review your communications materials and replace references to Telehealth Ontario with references to Health Connect Ontario.
- Consider referring febrile respiratory patients to their local [clinical assessment centre](#) if they cannot be safely cared for at home, or if the patient requires testing or treatment that you are unable to provide in your practice setting.
- We know you are **balancing many demands this fall** and may be doing so with limited staff and resources. The Centre for Effective Practice's [Preparing for fall in primary care](#) offers guidance for addressing key fall priorities.

COVID-19 testing and treatment

- **Testing for COVID-19** with RATs using the combined oral and nasal method is recommended for higher sensitivity (see [patient information](#) on this method, available in 26 languages). **PCR testing** is available for high-risk patients who may be eligible for COVID-19 treatments, including Paxlovid. See the [Ministry's website](#) for details.
- Primary care continues to play a key role in **COVID-19 treatment, including with Paxlovid**. This Ontario Health guidance summarizes [Paxlovid prescribing](#).
- For your patients diagnosed with COVID-19, Ontario Health has developed [guidance](#) for primary care on assessment and management of post-COVID condition.

COVID-19 and influenza vaccination

- **COVID-19 vaccination for those 6 months and older continues to be a priority**. Boosters for those 5 years+ and **Bivalent (Omicron)** boosters for those 12 years+ are available at either 3 or 6 months after completion of the primary series. This [Ministry guidance](#) includes a flow diagram to clarify when it's time to get a COVID-19 booster.
 - **Co-administration** of influenza and COVID-19 vaccines is acceptable for those ≥ 5 years of age, while 14 days of waiting is recommended for individuals 6 months to under 5 years of age to monitor for potential adverse events.
 - The [Sick Kids vaccine consult line](#) is a by-appointment phone line available to parents, children, youth, and those who are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning to conceive who are seeking further information about COVID-19 vaccination.
- **Influenza vaccination** is available, and further details on the universal influenza program, including high risk groups, are found [here](#). Two enhanced products are specifically indicated for those **65 years and older** (a high-dose quadrivalent and an adjuvant trivalent), noting that all products protect against influenza and patients should not delay vaccination to wait for a particular product.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) prophylaxis for high-risk infants

- Through the [RSV Prophylaxis for High-Risk Infants Program](#), the Ministry of Health covers the full cost of the drug palivizumab used to prevent a serious lower respiratory tract infection caused by RSV in infants <2 years of age at the start of the RSV season and at high risk for RSV disease

Regional support for primary care

Your Ontario Health Regions are making substantial efforts to support primary care through the current challenges. For further questions about local primary care fall preparedness, please find below a list of contacts by region.

Region	Contact
Toronto	Rose Cook (rose.cook@ontariohealth.ca)
East	Dr. David Zelt (david.zelt@ontariohealth.ca)
West	Dr. Jennifer Everson (jennifer.everson@ontariohealth.ca)
Central	Dr. Mira Backo-Shannon (mira.backo-shannon@ontariohealth.ca)
North East and North West	Dr. Paul Preston (paul.preston@ontariohealth.ca)

We are grateful for your commitment to the ongoing care of your patients during this challenging time and will continue to communicate with you about services and supports available to primary care.