

Questions and Answers for Health Care Stakeholders Viral Respiratory Illness (VRI) Season 2023/24, Updates to Infection Prevention and Control Measures in Health Care Settings

Date: September 28, 2023

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General

1. When will the IPC measures be reinstated in health care facilities in BC?

- The updated measures will come into effect on October 3rd, 2023, following the announcement from Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, and Minister of Health, Adrian Dix.

2. What other infection prevention and control measures are going to continue?

- The following IPC measures will remain unchanged and in place for the viral respiratory illness season:
 1. Hand hygiene:
 - Health care facilities will have alcohol-based hand rub available at entrances for people who wish/need to use them.
 - Health care workers will practice rigorous hand hygiene in accordance with the four moments for hand hygiene.
 2. Visitation:
 - No requirement for rapid point-of-care testing at LTC/Seniors' AL facility entry points.
 - No proof of vaccination requirement.
 - No limits on the number of visitors. Sites may specify requirements for visitors in units with extremely vulnerable patients (e.g., NICU; transplant) or during specific situations (e.g., to manage an outbreak).
 3. Self-assessment for health care workers:
 - HCWs will self-monitor for signs and symptoms of viral respiratory illness prior to work.
 - HCWs are required to stay home when sick, particularly when experiencing a cough or fever.
 4. Enhanced cleaning and disinfection:
 - Continued enhanced cleaning and disinfection in patient/resident rooms, treatment rooms, and high touch points.
 5. Immunization:
 - Health care workers must be immunized in accordance with Public Health Orders.
 - Visitors are not required to present proof-of-vaccination.
 6. Occupancy limits:
 - No occupancy limits in waiting rooms, meeting rooms, and communal areas.
 - Health care facilities must still follow capacity limits set out by other regulations (e.g., fire).

3. What infection prevention and control measures are being reinstated in health care facilities for the 2023/24 viral respiratory season?

- On September 28th, 2023, Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, and Minister of Health, Adrian Dix, made an announcement about the 2023/2024 viral respiratory illness season, the fall 2023 immunization campaign, and reinstatement of some infection prevention and control measures in health care facilities.
- The announcement includes reinstating some infection prevention and control (IPC) measures including medical masking policies for health care settings that are being put in place to protect patients, residents, clients, health care workers, and the public during viral respiratory illness season.
- The IPC measures that are being reinstated for viral respiratory illness season are:
 1. Medical Masking:
 - Health care workers (clinical and non-clinical staff), visitors, volunteers, contractors, and others must wear medical masks in patient care areas regardless of immunization status.
 - All visitors to LTC/Seniors' AL must wear a medical mask when moving through the facility and in common areas of the care home/residence. Masks are not required when visiting alone with a resident in a residents' room, an assisted living unit, or in a common area of the care home/residence.
 - In non-patient care areas (e.g., administrative offices, cafeterias), masks must be worn if required by workplace communicable disease safety plans or if directed by a medical health officer.
 - Patients must wear medical masks when directed by a health care provider or based on personal choice.
 2. Ambassadors:
 - Ambassadors at entrances to health care facilities will actively screen everyone for symptoms of viral respiratory illness, provide medical masks, and encourage people to perform hand hygiene upon entry.
 3. Visitors:
 - Active screening of visitors for symptoms of viral respiratory illness.
 - Visitor masking in accordance with masking requirements as above.

4. What is the annual respiratory illness season?

- The respiratory illness season takes place each year, starting in the fall and ending in early spring.
- It is the time of year where higher than average levels of respiratory illnesses, including cases of influenza, RSV and COVID-19, are observed across the population.

- The start and end of the respiratory illness season in the province are determined by the Provincial Health Officer, based on evidence of relevant epidemiological and health system trends.

5. What steps can everyone in BC take to prevent viral respiratory illness?

- The actions to help prevent illness and avoid spreading viral respiratory illness to others are the following:
 - Wash hands frequently.
 - Stay home when sick.
 - Wear a mask when experiencing mild symptoms of illness, when recovering from illness, or for additional protection based on personal choice.
 - Keep up-to-date on vaccinations.
 - Follow proper respiratory etiquette, such as covering coughs with an elbow or sleeve.
 - Properly dispose of tissues.
 - Respect personal space.

6. What IPC measures are required in facilities with an active VRI outbreak?

- When an outbreak is declared, Medical Health Officers and their official delegates have the authority to order any actions, restrictions and/or measures needed to bring the outbreak under control.

7. Why are updates being made within health care facilities for the 2023/23 viral respiratory illness season?

- The measures announced on September 28th coincide with the start of the 2023/24 respiratory illness season. The Provincial Health Officer, Infection Prevention and Control, and workplace health experts will continue to monitor provincial surveillance data over the spring and summer months to determine if any changes are warranted.

8. Will the updated measures apply to all health care settings across the province?

- The updated measures apply to all health authority facilities, programs, and services, including outpatient clinics (please refer to the Communique for more detail).
- There may be times when the updated measures will need to be adapted to meet exceptional, specific circumstances (e.g., mental health units where masking would negatively affect patients). While we always strive for a common provincial approach, implementation may not look the same in all health care settings across the province.

9. Does this mean that health care workers are required to wear medical masks while working?

- Regardless of immunization status, all health care workers (clinical and non-clinical staff), visitors, volunteers, contractors, and others are required to wear medical masks while working in patient care areas.
- Health care workers must also wear other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as determined by a Point-of-Care Risk Assessment.

10. What is defined as a “patient care area” for wearing a mask during viral respiratory illness season?

- A patient care area is an area within a health care facility (including a contracted facility), hallway or lobby, which is accessible to patients, residents, or clients who are there to access care or services. This includes any other location where care is provided, such as home and community care locations (including a client’s home), waiting rooms and ambulatory care clinics.
- A patient care area does not include locations such as administrative areas or private offices which are not generally accessed by patients, residents, or clients.
- A patient care area also does not include cafeterias, lunch/break rooms, research areas, engineering spaces, lecture halls, and meeting rooms which are not generally accessed by patients.

11. Do the enhanced infection control measures apply to home care?

- Yes, the medical masking requirements and other relevant infection control measures apply to health care provided in home and community care settings, including a client’s home.

12. Will the infection control requirements apply to provincial correctional facilities in BC?

- Yes, the enhanced infection control measures, including medical mask requirements, apply to units and locations in provincial correctional facilities where health care services are provided (e.g., health clinics, first aid rooms).
- Infection control measures for federal correctional facilities are determined by the Government of Canada.

13. If nurses and officers need to go to the living unit in a correctional facility (i.e., outside of the health care clinic or first aid room, but still within the facility), do the nurses and officers need to mask while providing care? Does the inmate need to mask?

- To protect the patient, health care worker, and others from respiratory illness, if a person is receiving care or services in the living area of a correctional facility, the health care worker will wear a mask, as this is considered a patient care area, for the duration of the care provided. Patients should mask based on their personal choice or if directed by a health care worker, regardless of immunization status.

14. If nurses and officers need to go to an area within the correctional facility where care is being provided (i.e.: outside of the health care clinic or first aid room, but still within the facility), do the nurses and officers need to mask while providing care? Does the client need to mask?

- If a person is receiving care or services in any area within the correctional facility, the health care worker will wear a mask, as this is considered a patient care area, for the duration of the care provided. Patients do not need to wear a mask unless directed by a health care worker, regardless of immunization status. The correctional officers should mask according to their Workplace Occupational Health and Safety Plan. In situations where there is a life-threatening medical emergency requiring health care staff to attend outside of the health care clinic, best efforts by all staff (both health care and corrections officers) should be made to wear a medical mask.

15. If officers are transporting an inmate who is receiving medical treatment through a correctional facility, does the officer need to wear a mask? Does the inmate/patient need to wear a mask?

- Health care workers (clinical and non-clinical staff), regardless of immunization status, must wear a medical mask in a patient care area, which is considered where patients access care or services. People transporting a person who is incarcerated should mask in the area where the patient is receiving care or services, but not during transport unless other patients are present in that area (e.g.: waiting room). Patients should mask if directed by a health care worker, regardless of immunization status.

16. Are Point-of-Care Risk Assessments still required?

- Yes, Point-of-Care Risk Assessments (PCRA) by health care workers are still required before every patient, client, and resident encounter to determine all the appropriate protective measures (including the use of PPE) needed to safely provide care.

17. Are the enhanced IPC measures for health care settings during viral respiratory illness season permanent?

- Provincial public health and infection control experts will continue to monitor global, national, and local incidence of viral respiratory illness and provincial health system trends to assess the ongoing need for additional infection control measures.

18. Do these reinstated measures only pertain to COVID-19?

- No. COVID-19 continues to be an ongoing health concern around the world, including in BC. Influenza, RSV, and other respiratory viruses will also be circulating in BC this fall and winter. The additional infection control measures being put in place will reduce transmission risks and better protect our health care system against all viral respiratory illnesses.

19. What is the role of ambassadors at health care facilities?

- Health authorities are reinstating ambassadors at facility entrances.
- While ambassadors will not be checking visitor vaccination status or confirming COVID-19 test results, they will be:
 1. Greeting visitors.
 2. Actively screening everyone for symptoms of viral respiratory illness upon entry.
 3. Directing everyone to perform hand hygiene upon entry.
 4. Providing medical masks.
 5. Educating visitors on additional IPC measures, as appropriate.
 6. Carrying out other tasks as needed, within the parameters of their job descriptions.

20. Are screeners/ambassadors required to screen health care workers for symptoms of viral respiratory illness?

- No, ambassadors will not be screening health care workers.
- Health care workers will be self-screening for signs and symptoms and their own risk factors before entering a health facility.

21. Does this mean that all points of entry into a health facility (e.g., hospital) can remain open?

- All facility entrances can remain open if there is an ambassador present.

22. Will the updates guidelines and measures apply to retirement homes/independent living sites?

- Independent living (IL) sites are not health care sites and therefore are not subject to the infection prevention and control measures for health care sites.
- However, if IL sites share common areas, hallways and entrances with Long Term-Care and Seniors' Assisted Living Facilities (e.g., on a campus of care), people will be expected to follow the updated requirements.
- Visitors to IL residents within a campus of care who are sick or show symptoms of viral respiratory illness can be discouraged from visiting but cannot be prevented from visiting IL residents.

Long Term-Care and Seniors' Assisted Living Facilities

23. What changes are being made specific to Long-Term Care and Seniors' Assisted Living facilities?

- The following changes have been announced for visitors at Long-Term Care and Seniors' Assisted Living facilities:
- Visitors to Long Term Care and Seniors' Assisted Living must wear a medical mask in communal areas and when participating in indoor events, gatherings and activities in common areas of the care home/residence. Masks are not required when visiting with a resident in their room, or an assisted living unit, or when visiting in a common area of the care home/residence when others are not around.
- There are no restrictions on gatherings, events and activities.
- Visitors do not need to provide proof of their vaccination status to enter a Long-Term Care or Assisted Living facility.
- Visitors do not need to undergo testing for COVID-19 or confirm a recent negative test result prior to entering a Long-Term Care or Assisted Living facility.

24. Will Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facilities be allowed to impose any restrictions or limitations on visitors to their specific facility?

- Current policies in place in Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facilities across the province require that residents can receive any visitors of their choosing at any time.
- These regulations also require that resident health and safety are maintained while allowing visitors. Any limitations on visitors can and will be made for health and safety reasons (for example, the limitations imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic).

25. If visitors are no longer required to be vaccinated does that mean that unvaccinated staff can return to working in Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facilities?

- No. The requirement that staff in these facilities are vaccinated against COVID-19 (or have a medical exemption) remains in place.

26. Are staff and visitors in Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facilities required to wear medical masks?

- Yes. Health care workers must wear a medical mask, as well as all other PPE indicated by a Point-of-Care Risk Assessment that considers all occupational risks, including potential respiratory illness.
- Visitors to Long Term Care and Seniors' Assisted Living must wear a medical mask in communal areas and when participating in indoor events, gatherings, and activities in common areas of the care home/residence. Masks are not required when visiting with a resident in their room, or an assisted living unit, or when visiting in a common area of the care home/residence when others are not around.

27. Will enhanced cleaning and disinfecting practices continue in Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facilities?

- Yes. As per Infection and Protection Control guidance, enhanced cleaning and disinfection will continue, including all high touch surfaces.

28. Is hand hygiene still required?

- Yes. Rigorous hand washing is still expected for staff and visitors.
- Sites will continue to have alcohol-based hand rub available for people at entrances and at the point of care.

29. Is a single point of entry to a Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facility still required?

- Facilities can allow visitors to enter through any entrance where an ambassador is present.

30. Will visitors still be required to sign into facilities when they enter?

- No. Visitors are not required to sign in upon entry.
- Facilities are welcome to use their own processes for tracking visitors, such as those that were in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Updates to Masking Policies

31. Are masks required in all health care settings at this time?

- Yes, masks are required in all health care settings moving forward, as follows:

In patient/client/resident care areas:

- Continuous medical masking by health care workers, visitors, contractors, and volunteers is required in patient/client/resident care areas of health-care facilities, including all health authority hospitals and clinical settings, long-term care, seniors' assisted living settings, private hospitals, and Provincial mental health facilities. Private clinics and professional colleges including those involved in community imaging clinics will set policy directives for their staff/registrants for the protection of patients, health care workers, and others from respiratory illness.
- Patients/residents/clients may choose to wear a medical mask based on personal choice unless directed to wear one by a health care provider (and as tolerated). Patients/residents/clients are strongly encouraged to wear a medical mask during transport to and/from their room, as tolerated.
- Health care workers must wear other PPE (e.g.: respirator) where indicated by a PCRA that considers all occupational risks, including potential respiratory illness, or as directed by a medical health officer, or as required by workplace communicable disease safety plans.
- Visitors to LTC/Seniors' AL: All visitors are required to wear a medical mask when moving through and/or participating in indoor events, gatherings and activities in common areas of the care home/residence. Masks are not required when visiting alone with a resident in a residents' room, an assisted living unit, or in a common area of the care home/residence.

- Patients are encouraged to mask during transport.

In non-patient/non-resident/non-client care areas:

- Visitors/health care workers/contractors may choose whether to mask based on personal choice, unless directed by an MHO or a health care professional.
- Visitors/health care workers/contractors to mask in other areas where it is required by workplace safety plans or as directed by an MHO.

32. Are facilities with clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) populations able to continue masking?

- Yes. Continuous medical masking by health care workers, visitors, contractors, and volunteers is required in patient/client/resident care areas in health care facilities.
- Masks are required in clinical and patient care areas where extra protection is needed to protect vulnerable patients (e.g.: burn units, bone marrow transplants).

33. Will continuous masking be reinstated each year during annual respiratory illness season?

- At this time, no decisions have been made about returning to continuous medical masking at the start of every viral respiratory illness season. This information and guidance will apply to the 2023/24 viral respiratory illness season only.
- The Provincial Health Officer, Office of Public Health, Infection Prevention and Control, and workplace health experts will continue to review this issue and monitor provincial surveillance data over the fall, winter, spring and summer months to determine if additional IPC measures are warranted or to be discontinued.
- Any updated measures and/or restrictions put into effect during the respiratory illness season will consider provincial needs, epidemiological concerns, and health system trends at that time.

Updates to Vaccination Policies

34. If health care workers are masking in patient care areas, do they still need to be vaccinated against COVID-19?

- The Provincial Health Officer Order for health care worker vaccination remains in effect. At this time, health care workers in acute care, long term care and seniors' assisted living settings are required to be vaccinated against COVID-19 or have a medical exemption.
- Regardless of immunization status, all health care workers (clinical and non-clinical staff), visitors, volunteers, contractors, and others are required to wear medical masks while working in patient care areas.

35. Why are vaccinations for health care workers still required if some infection control measures have been lifted?

- COVID-19 continues to be an active public health concern across the province and around the world.
- Continuing to receive COVID-19 vaccinations as they become available can help to lessen the impact of the COVID-19 on the health care system.
- Vaccinations for COVID-19 continue to be recommended by health experts to protect individuals and communities. Having a largely vaccinated population can help to keep COVID-19 transmission rates at a steady, manageable state across the province.

Updates to Occupational Health Policies

36. What changes are being made to occupational health and exposure policies for health care workers?

- Viral respiratory illness return to work policies and exposure guidance for health care workers is being updated. The updated policies include guidelines for staff returning to work following viral respiratory illness or exposure.
- Health-care workers must follow VRI exposure and return to work guidance.
- There will be continuous medical masking by health-care workers, visitors, contractors, and volunteers in patient care areas of health-care facilities, including: all health authority hospitals and clinical settings, long-term care, seniors assisted living settings, private hospitals, and Provincial mental health facilities.

37. When the guidelines for masking, Ambassadors, and visitation come into effect on October 3, 2023, does that mean the facilities must operationalize/ put the updated measures into effect immediately?

- The updated Ministry of Health policies will take effect on Tuesday, October 3, 2023.
- Health system partners are required to implement the changes as quickly as possible.
- It is understood that some sites, including facilities or units experiencing an outbreak and sites with unusual circumstances, will need additional time to implement the changes.

38. There are several existing public-facing documents related to COVID-19 (outbreaks, RTW, surgical algorithm) that will require updating, as well as newly drafted documents - where can we find these?

- Work is already underway to update BC's COVID-19 infection prevention and control guidance documents (e.g.: mask policy, long-term care visitation policy) for the new measures.

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Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Branch, Ministry of Health

- These documents will be accessible through the following website:
 - <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/info/response>