

Questions and Answers for Stakeholders ***End of Respiratory Season 2023, Updates to PHO Measures in Health Care Settings***

Last update: April 6, 2023

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General

1. What is being announced?

- On April 6, 2023, Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, and Minister of Health, Adrian Dix, announced the end of the 2023 respiratory season.
- The announcement included lifting public health measures and updating Ministry of Health policies for health care settings that were put in place to protect patients, residents, health care workers, and the public during COVID-19 pandemic.
- The updates include:
 - a. Removing vaccination and screening requirements for visitors at health care facilities, including the need to check for visitor proof of vaccination.
 - b. Removing the requirement for visitors in Long-Term Care and Assisted Living Seniors' facilities to be rapid tested for COVID-19.
 - c. Removing universal masking requirements for health care workers and visitors.

2. What is the annual respiratory illness season?

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

3. When will the updated measures and lifting of some restrictions take effect across the province?

- The updated measures and the lifting of some restrictions will come into effect immediately on April 6th, following the announcement from Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, and Minister of Health, Adrian Dix.

4. Will the updated measures apply in facilities with an active COVID-19 outbreak?

- Medical Health Officers and public health staff will continue to have the authority to declare a COVID-19 outbreak and implement restrictions and/or measures as needed.
- Any additional measures in high-risk environments and those with an active COVID-19 outbreak will be implemented at the direction of the Provincial Health Officer, Medical Health Officers and/or a facility's official delegates.
- For facilities that currently have an active COVID-19 outbreak, the timeline for implementing updated measures and lifting restrictions will be at the discretion of the local Medical Health Officer or their official delegate.

5. Will any existing PHO COVID-19 measures/restrictions remain in place following the April 6th announcement?

- The following measures will continue to be required and supported in health care settings following the April 6th announcement:
 - a. Visitors are still not to visit health care facilities if they are sick or have active respiratory symptoms.
 - b. Health care workers are still required to self-monitor for respiratory symptoms (including but not limited to those of COVID-19) and stay home if they are sick.
 - c. Medical masks and alcohol-based hand rub will still be provided at the entrances of health care facilities.
 - d. COVID-19 vaccination requirements will remain in place for health care workers working in health care facilities.
 - e. Requirements for enhanced cleaning and disinfection in health care environments, including in patient rooms, will remain.
 - f. The display of signage reminding staff and visitors to not enter health care facilities if they are sick or have active viral respiratory symptoms, will remain.

6. Why are updates being made to PHO measures at this time?

- Decisions to ease the PHO measures are made under the guidance of the Provincial Health Officer after considering the epidemiology for influenza, RSV and COVID-19, as well as high COVID-19 vaccination rates among Long-Term Care residents, health care workers, and the general population.
- In March 2022, a phased approach was developed to ease COVID-19 measures in health care settings across the province. This included expanding the number of visitors allowed in Long Term Care facilities, removing physical distancing requirements and removing room occupancy limits in health care settings.
- The planned removal of additional restrictions in health care settings was put on hold at that time to protect health care workers and patients during the 2022/23 respiratory illness season.
- The eased measures announced on April 6th coincide with the end of the 2022/23 respiratory season.
- The updated measures also align with the current COVID-19 measures in non-healthcare settings.

7. How can we be sure that it is safe to remove PHO measures at this time?

- The decision to ease any implemented measures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are done in consultation with public health, infection control and workplace health experts.
- The decision was also made by considering current vaccination and epidemiological trends across the province.
- Downward trends have been observed in hospital occupancy rates in recent months indicating that the burden posed by COVID-19 on the province's health care system is continuing to remain stable and low.
- Medical experts and the Provincial Health Officer will continue to monitor COVID-19 trends across the province and determine if updated measures, including the possible reinstatement of restrictions, are needed.

8. Will the lifted restrictions and updated PHO measures apply to all health care settings?

- Yes, the updated measures apply to all health care facilities, programs and services, including community physician offices and outpatient clinics.

9. Does this mean that health care workers will no longer be required to wear masks while working?

- Health care workers will continue to wear medical masks and other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as determined by a Point of Care Risk Assessment. Universal masking requirements will remain in settings with clinically extremely vulnerable patients, such as burn units and bone marrow transplant units.

10. Will the updated measures be adopted consistently in health care settings across the province?

- Across the province we have provincial infection control policies that apply to all health care settings. The expectation remains that health care providers will implement measures in ways that protect the patients, health care workers, and members of the public visiting and/or using their facility.
- This means that the updated measures will not necessarily look the same in all health care settings across the province. For example, universal masking will continue in clinical areas with vulnerable populations (e.g., burn units).

11. Will Point of Care Risk Assessments remain in place moving forward?

- Yes, Point of Care Risk Assessments will continue to be used by health care workers to determine the appropriate measures (including PPE) needed to safely perform their duties.

12. Will the changes made to the PHO measures in health care settings be permanent?

- Public health experts will continue to monitor health trends and risks across the province and implement updated measures and/or restrictions as needed.
- Universal medical masking may be reinstated if circumstances require.

13. Do these updated measures mean that the COVID-19 pandemic is over?

- No. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be an ongoing health concern around the world. However, with the introduction of new vaccination and treatment options, provincial risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have changed.
- Provincial health experts will continue to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic situation, provide updates, and implement relevant measures and/or restrictions as needed.

14. Does this mean that all points of entry into a health facility (e.g., hospital) can be re-opened?

- Yes. Facilities, including hospitals, can now re-open all entrances and allow patients, visitors, staff etc. to enter through any entry point.
- Staff are no longer required to be present at entry-points for screening purposes including:
 - a. Checking vaccination status
 - b. Enforcing mask use
- Staff can continue to be present at facility entrances for purposes including greeting visitors and ensuring masks and alcohol-based hand rubs are available at entrances for those who wish to use them.

Long Term-Care and Seniors' Assisted Living Facilities

15. 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:
 - a. Visitors no longer need to provide their vaccination status when entering a Long-Term Care or Assisted Living facility.
 - b. Visitors are no longer required to undergo rapid testing for COVID-19 or confirm a recent negative test result prior to entering a Long-Term Care or Assisted Living facility.
 - c. Visitors are no longer required to wear a mask in common areas or resident rooms unless directed by a health care professional. Visitors may choose to wear a mask based on personal preference.
 - d. There are no longer any restrictions on gatherings, events and activities.

16. Will there be any restrictions on visitor limits in Long-Term Care or Assisted Living facilities moving forward?

- Medical experts and the Provincial Health Officer will continue to monitor health trends across the province and make updates to measures, including the possible reinstatement of restrictions, if needed.

17. Will Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facilities be allowed to impose any restrictions or limitations on visitors for 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).
- Restrictions for visitors may be reinstated in the future based on provincial needs at the discretion of the Provincial Health Officer.

18. 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 be vaccinated for COVID-19 (or have a medical exemption) will remain in place.

19. Will staff and visitors in Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facilities still be required to wear masks?

- Universal masking for health care workers and visitors is no longer required.
- Health care workers will wear a medical mask and/or other PPE (e.g., respirator) based on a Point of Care Risk Assessment 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 must wear a medical mask or other PPE when directed by a health care professional.
- Masks will be made available at the entrances of facilities for staff and visitors who wish to use them.

20. 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 in resident rooms.

21. Will hand hygiene practices continue to be recommended?

- Yes. Rigorous hand washing is still expected and recommended for staff and visitors.
- Sites will continue to have alcohol-based hand rub available for people who wish to use them.

22. Is a single-entry point to a Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facility, for example only through the front door, still required? Will entry points into a facility need to be monitored by a screener/ ambassador?

- No. Facilities can allow visitors to enter through any entrance. This includes allowing visitors who have tested positive for COVID-19.
- COVID-19 rapid testing and vaccination screening will no longer be required for visitors entering a facility.
- Long-Term Care and Assisted Living facilities must continue to remind visitors (e.g., with signage) not to enter when they are sick or displaying respiratory symptoms.

23. Is any active screening of visitors still required?

- No. Active screening is no longer required. Visitors will be encouraged to self-monitor for signs and symptoms of illness, and to not visit when sick.
- Passive screening refers to visitors assessing their own risk factors and determining for themselves whether they should enter a Long-Term Care and/or Assisted Living facility.

24. How can facilities encourage visitors to practice passive screening?

- Facilities can encourage passive screening by:
 - a. Displaying signage reminding visitors not to enter a facility if they are sick or are displaying symptoms.
 - b. Displaying signage reminding visitors to continue to practice proper hand hygiene and providing resources to educate people about proper hand hygiene practices.
 - c. Encouraging staff to remind visitors and residents that people who are sick or displaying symptoms should not enter a facility (without actively asking each visitor whether they have symptoms).

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

- No. Visitors will no longer be 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.

26. Are screeners/ambassadors still required at facilities?

- While screeners/ambassadors will no longer be required to monitor visitor vaccination statuses, rapid test results, or masking, screeners can be still be used for purposes including:
 - a. Greeting visitors
 - b. Ensuring masks and alcohol-based hand rubs are available for people who wish to use them
 - c. Reminding visitors about proper hand hygiene practices
 - d. Supporting passive screening
 - e. Other facility tasks as needed, within the parameters of their job descriptions

Updates to Masking Policies

27. Are masks required in any health care settings moving forward?

- Universal masking for health care workers and visitors is no longer required.
- Health care workers will wear a medical mask and/or other PPE (e.g., respirator) based on a point-of-care risk assessment 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.
- In routine circumstances, patients and visitors should wear a medical mask based on personal choice.
- Patients, residents and visitors must wear a medical mask or other PPE when directed by a health care professional.

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

- Yes. 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).
- This has been the case since prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

29. Will universal masking be reinstated each year during annual respiratory illness season?

- At this time, no decisions have been made about returning to universal masking at the start of the next annual respiratory illness season.
- 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 spring and summer months to determine if any changes are warranted.

- Updates will be given by the Provincial Health Officer at the start of the next respiratory illness season (fall 2023).
- 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.

30. Will health care facilities be notified in advance when/if universal masking is required again in the fall?

- Yes. Universal masking measures will be set to take effect on a pre-determined date to allow health care workers and facilities time to prepare.

Updates to Vaccination Policies

31. Does this mean that staff in health care settings (acute care, hospitals) no longer need to be vaccinated against COVID-19?

- No. Health care workers will continue to be required to be vaccinated against COVID-19 (or have a medical exemption).

32. Will there be a spring 2023 COVID-19 immunization program?

- Yes. The spring COVID-19 immunization program has started for those at highest risk of contracting COVID-19.
- Updates will be provided to other groups about how and where to receive a spring booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine in the coming months.

33. Why are vaccinations still being encouraged if other restrictions are being lifted?

- COVID-19 continues to be an active public health concern across the province and around the world.
- Continuing to receive COVID-19 vaccination boosters 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

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

- COVID-19 specific return to work policies and exposure guidance for health care workers will be updated in the coming weeks and months to address the updated measures. The updated policies will include guidelines for staff returning to work following COVID-19 illness or exposure.

35. Will protections remain in place to support health care workers who are unable to attend work in-person when they are COVID-19 positive?

- Health care workers will continue to be required to self-monitor for COVID-19 and other respiratory symptoms and stay home if they are sick.
- There will be no changes to policies previously developed around procedures for staff who cannot attend work due to COVID-19 illness.

36. How can we be sure that continuing to lift COVID-19 restrictions won't place further burdens on BC's health care system?

- Decisions to ease COVID-19 restrictions were established in consultation with public health, infection control and workplace health experts.
- Downward trends have been observed in hospital occupancy rates in recent months indicating that COVID-19's effect on BC's health care system has lessened.
- Medical experts and the Provincial Health Officer will continue to monitor COVID-19 trends across the province and make updates to measures, including possible reinstatement of restrictions, if needed.

37. What will happen to staff who were previously involved in screening visitors, checking visitor vaccination status, etc. (e.g., staff employed as a part of an ambassador program)?

- These workers' responsibilities will be updated to include:
 - a. Greeting visitors
 - b. Ensuring that masks are available for people who want them
 - c. Reminding visitors about hand hygiene policies
 - d. Other necessary facility support tasks

38. If the restrictions for masking, Ambassadors, and visitation are lifted on April 6th, does that mean the facilities must operationalize/ put the updated measures into effect immediately?

- The lifting of PHO orders and the shift to updated Ministry of Health policies take effect at 1pm on Thursday, April 6, 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.

39. There are several existing public-facing documents related to COVID-19 (outbreaks, RTW, surgical algorithm) that will require time to be updated or newly drafted - do these also need to go live on April 6th?

- 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 April 6th announcement.
- Given the large number of infection prevention and control documents created during the pandemic, updating all the documents will take some time.
- This work will continue over the spring and summer, starting with the highest priority documents identified by our provincial public health, infection prevention and control, and workplace health experts.