



September 3, 2021

COVID-19 update re: in-person and virtual care

Dear physician,

The last 17 months have been an extremely challenging time for patients, practitioners, and staff as we have collectively managed the COVID-19 pandemic in BC. Physicians, nurse practitioners and health-care staff have risen to the challenge and played an integral role preventing and managing COVID-19. Numerous examples of collaboration, flexibility, and cooperation have occurred across the province to ensure that patients continue to have access to essential medical care, including primary care.

We are now at a different stage in the COVID-19 pandemic in BC. COVID-19 is now a vaccine preventable virus that we will be living with into the future. There is strong evidence of effectiveness for individual and population protection from COVID-19, including against all variants currently circulating in BC. This includes strong protection against COVID-19 infection, serious illness and sustained community transmission. All eligible individuals in BC have now been offered an opportunity for COVID-19 immunization. Vaccination uptake is high and increasing—currently, over 80% of eligible people in BC (12+) have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine and over 75% are fully vaccinated. As a result, serious illness and deaths have decreased significantly in BC.

In response to the pandemic and the infection control challenges in care settings in the community, many practitioners have taken up virtual platforms to continue to provide remote care to their patients throughout the pandemic. While these tools have advantages for certain patient care needs, including providing necessary virtual pathways to care in remote and Indigenous communities, the pandemic experience has also reinforced the vital importance of hands on in-person care. Potential drawbacks of providing only virtual care could result in unnecessary emergency room visits when patients are unable to access necessary face-to-face visits, specialist referrals that lack sufficient or pertinent clinical information for accurate triaging and care, and lack of access to important preventive and screening health services.

Given broad vaccination coverage, COVID-19 should no longer pose a barrier to in-person practice. It is the joint position of the Provincial Health Officer, Ministry of Health, and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC that health care that includes in-person assessments and preventative health measures (such as Pap tests and childhood immunizations) is an important determinant of health. With appropriate measures in place, **we expect all practitioners to resume routine in-person visits** based on clinical needs and patient preferences.

- The recently updated [COVID-19 Infection Prevention and Control Guidance for Community-Based Physicians, Nurse Practitioners, Nurses and Midwives in Clinic Settings](#) outlines appropriate infection prevention and control measures given what we now know about the current risk of community

transmission. The guidance includes updated information on the appropriate use of personal protective equipment, physical distancing and capacity limits, and screening for COVID-19 symptoms.

- The medical mask [requirements](#) for health-care settings, including primary care provider offices, remain in effect.
- The [Health PPE Portal](#) is available to order PPE and critical supplies for your medical practice free of charge. You will be able to place your next order on the portal starting on September 1, 2021.

For those who continue to offer a blend of in-person and virtual visits, please refer to the following practice standard and guidance for virtual care:

- [Virtual Care](#) practice standard from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC reflecting professional standards and ethical conduct when delivering care virtually.
- Guidance regarding the provision of **virtual primary care services** (including appropriate use, cultural safety, information and technology management, compensation) developed collaboratively through the Joint Collaborative Committee Integration Council on Virtual Care will be available in the fall following consultation with partners.

You may recall that a series of adjustments to the payment schedule were approved by the Medical Services Commission on the basis that they were temporary and could be cancelled on the advice of the Provincial Health Officer. The Ministry is actively reviewing the current temporary fee codes and considering the appropriate path forward for virtual care compensation for the continued benefit of patients, while also supporting our strategic focus on access and attachment within the context of longitudinal primary care.

Vaccination is the most effective measure to reduce the risk of COVID-19 in individuals and in our community. Evidence indicates that receiving a vaccine recommendation from a trusted practitioner is one of the most effective ways to overcome vaccine hesitancy. It is important that you continue to have these conversations with eligible patients, and encourage them to get fully vaccinated as soon as possible. More information on COVID-19 vaccines can be found [here](#).

Thank you again for your work to support the primary care system and health of British Columbians.

Sincerely,



Ted Patterson
Assistant Deputy Minister
Primary Care Division
Ministry of Health



Bonnie Henry, MD, MPH, FRCPC
Provincial Health Officer
Ministry of Health



Heidi M. Oetter, MD
Registrar and CEO
College of Physicians and
Surgeons of British Columbia