

Memorandum

Date: September 29, 2023
To: VCH Staff and Medical Staff
From: Dr. Patricia Daly, Vice-President, Public Health & Chief Medical Health Officer; Dr Matthew Kwok, Vice-President of Quality and Patient Safety and IPAC
Cc: Dr. Marthe Charles, Division Head, Medical Microbiology, IPAC; Kelsi Rivers, Regional Director IPAC; Dr. Meena Dawar, Medical Health Officer, Communicable Disease Control; Dr. Meaghan Thumath, Regional Director of Communicable Disease Control
Re: **New provincial guidance for respiratory illness season**

With the start of fall, we can expect an increase in transmission of respiratory illnesses such as influenza, RSV, COVID-19 and cold viruses. To help protect the most vulnerable in our population, and to lessen the impact on all of you and our health-care system, Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry has [announced](#) new guidance ahead of respiratory illness season.

Immunizations

Influenza and COVID-19 vaccines help you stay your healthiest and prevent disruptions to family, social and work life. Starting Oct. 10, Influenza vaccines are available to staff and medical staff at VCH staff clinics. You can also get your influenza and COVID-19 vaccines at the same time at a primary care provider's office or pharmacy, or at a Public Health clinic. Get more information at one.vch.ca/flu.

COVID-19 vaccines will not be available at staff influenza clinics. Health-care workers who are registered with B.C.'s [Get Vaccinated](#) system will receive an invitation in the next couple of weeks to book an appointment at a pharmacy or community clinic. It is recommended you wait a minimum of six months since your last COVID-19 vaccine or known infection before getting the updated vaccine to ensure the best response.

VCH employees should self-report their influenza vaccination status using the provincial self-reporting site, regardless of whether they received their vaccine from a staff clinic or through the provincial booking system.

New health-care workers are still required to be immunized against COVID-19 (or have a medical exemption), but those who are unvaccinated will only require a single dose of the most-recent, updated COVID-19 vaccine available this fall.

Provincial Mask Policy

Beginning Tuesday Oct. 3, a new temporary Provincial Mask Policy will go into effect in VCH health-care facilities, including acute care and VCH community-based health-care services, as well as in long-term care and assisted living homes. Medical masks will be available at these VCH sites.



Under the new policy, medical masks must be worn by all staff, volunteers, contractors and visitors in patient-care areas, including their associated waiting rooms. Lobbies, cafeterias, hallways, administrative areas, meeting rooms, and research spaces are exempt from this requirement. However, people may still choose to wear a mask based on their personal preference. In long-term care and assisted living facilities, staff, volunteers and visitors must wear medical masks in all public areas of the facility, but visitors may remove them when visiting with residents in their rooms.

The policy does not apply to patients and residents, and there are also exceptions for:

- Children under 5 years old
- People unable to wear a mask because of a health condition or physical or mental impairment
- People unable to put on or remove a mask without help from another person
- People communicating with someone with a hearing or cognitive impairment, or in other circumstances where mask wearing interferes with care delivery

New entrance signage about the Provincial Mask Policy will be available for posting at all VCH health-care sites on Tuesday, Oct. 3. (On Tuesday morning, download the relevant versions from ipac.vch.ca.)

The policy does not apply to: private health-care providers, supported housing, prisons, community services, non-profit organizations, overdose prevention sites, group homes, drop-in centres, adult day programs, seniors housing, support groups, community centres, food banks or drop-in meal services.

Entrance Screening:

Ambassadors will be in place at the main entrance of hospitals, and at long-term care facilities, to welcome people, support screening for symptoms of respiratory illnesses, hand out medical masks, and request people clean their hands before entering.

Other than the new masking and screening requirements, there will be no change to our existing policies and guidelines for visitors at our health-care facilities. There are no new limits on the number of visitors and proof of vaccination is not required. As always, if a visitor feels unwell, we recommend they return at a later date when they feel better.

Returning to work after respiratory illness:

Pathogens other than SARS-CoV-2 can also transmit to others, so regardless of the nature of their illness, health-care workers should stay home until symptoms improve and they feel better. New *Return to Work Guidance* will be posted shortly on the BCCDC website, which we'll share when available. Remember that health information, including a COVID-19 diagnosis, is private information. It is up to the staff member to decide if they wish to share details with others.

Additional notes:

As always, continue to practice excellent hand hygiene and follow the infection prevention and control, PPE and Point of Care Risk Assessment (PCRA) processes and policies for VCH sites and programs.

Thank you for your continued compassion and patience as these changes are implemented.

