

Changing the Way We Work

June 16, 2023: COVID-19 Updates and Solutions for Family Practice Challenges

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Moderator: Dr. Tara Kiran

Curated answers from CoP guests, panelists and co-hosts to in-session questions posed by participants, based on current guidance and information available at the time.

COVID-19 Data

What preventative measures are being taken in Australia for COVID-19 compared to here?

Australia currently has the same population-based preventive measures in place (i.e., no restrictions, no broad masking mandates or recommendations, no travel restrictions or vaccine requirements). So, it is a good comparison to where we are now in Ontario, and we expect their data to be a helpful predictor for our respiratory season.

Can you please provide us with the number of COVID-19 cases per week and the numbers of hospitalizations?

Dr. Warshafsky's slides will be available on the CoP website, which include these details.

COVID-19 Vaccines and Boosters

How many doses of the COVID-19 vaccine should we have received by now? The initial series and how many boosters?

Currently, the recommendation is for everyone to have received at minimum a primary series, so two doses (three if immunocompromised) and a booster dose within the last six months. It's more important to consider when your last dose was, rather than the total number you've received.

What are the recommendations for COVID-19 booster doses during pregnancy?

The most recent recommendations from SOGC and NACI advise all pregnant individuals in any trimester of their pregnancy receive a COVID-19 booster. It's crucial because pregnant individuals are at a higher risk for severe outcomes from COVID-19.

Are there any combined flu/COVID-19 vaccines being developed?

There are combination vaccines in the pipeline, but at this point, it looks like they won't be available until at least next season.

RSV Vaccines

Is GSK's RSV vaccine for adults going to be available in Canada soon? Would you recommend it when it is available? Will it be covered by Public Health?

We are hoping for it to be authorized for use by Health Canada in September or October. Unfortunately, NACI recommendations will not be available at that time. However, the studies show it is a highly effective product with minimal side effects, so, it will likely be recommended. Without knowing when it will be authorized or the supply it's impossible to say if it will be publicly funded or for which populations at this time.

COVID-19 Testing

How will people be able to make decisions about returning to work or school without reliable access to COVID-19 RATs?

Currently, it is recommended that people stay home until any symptoms of a respiratory infection are resolved. Regardless of if it is COVID-19, flu, RSV or a cold, people who are sick should stay home and only return to work when they are feeling well. RATs are not sensitive enough to detect COVID-19 after the first week, so it is not a useful tool in determining infectivity beyond that point. Additionally, infectivity 24 hours after symptoms resolve is extremely low.

Which swab should be used to conduct a PCR test for COVID-19 in our office?

Details on how to collect specimens for COVID-19 can be found here:

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/laboratory-services/covid-19-pcr-collection-kits>

Should I conduct a PCR test in office if a RAT is negative, but the patient is symptomatic?

Yes, if your patient is a high-risk individual who if positive for COVID-19 you would prescribe treatment, then performing a PCR test would be recommended.

High-risk Patients

What is the current definition of high-risk individual?

Individuals aged 65 years and older; Residents of long-term care homes, retirement homes, Elder Care Lodges, and other congregate living settings for seniors; Individuals aged 18 years and older living in a congregate care setting for people with complex medical care needs; Pregnant individuals; Individuals aged 18 years and older who are moderately to severely immunocompromised; and Individuals aged 55 years and older who identify as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis and their non-Indigenous household members aged 55 years and older.

Should we prescribe Paxlovid for high-risk patients who are planning to travel?

You can write a prescription in advance and have that available to be filled at a pharmacy. However, the patient needs to test positive for COVID-19 in order to have the prescription filled.

Pre-screening for In-Person Appointments

Can we stop screening patients for COVID-19/respiratory symptoms before office visits until the fall?

It is recommended to continue screening patients for respiratory illness in the office. You'll see this outlined in the updated guidance here:

<https://www.ontariofamilyphysicians.ca/ModuleFile/file.xyz?id=2414>

Masking Guidance

Is it safe to go on a 10-hour flight without a mask?

This would need an individual risk assessment based on your medical conditions. For individuals who are otherwise healthy, the risk of contracting any respiratory illness on a plane is exceptionally low. The ventilation and air circulation systems on a plane are very good and only individuals seated in the same row, directly in front or behind you could potentially be at risk. If someone is displaying respiratory symptoms right beside you then masking would be a good idea.

Advocacy at the OCFP

Could the next steps in the OCFP's advocacy work be to work on the image of family doctors? In order to recruit new family doctors, we need to be viewed as more than "just family doctors", or victims with too much paperwork and administrative duties.

Thanks for raising this important point. We have seen a shift with our advocacy work, but we will keep working on raising the profile and importance of family physicians in our health-care system.

These additional questions were answered live during the session. To view responses, please refer to the session recording.

- What is the effectiveness of the COVID-19 Pfizer bivalent vaccine at two weeks, three months and six months for protection against infection and severe illness or hospitalization?
- Any comments about the RSV vaccine for seniors?
- What is the true estimate of the number of COVID-19 cases per week in Ontario?
- Is it safe to be maskless indoors with a large group of people in Ontario right now?
- How come when we review the requirements for masking, we only consider the number of COVID-19 cases and success of hybrid immunity and do not consider the potential for Long COVID and risks for auto immune diseases or cancer to develop in the future?
- Is there any information about vaccines for the fall? Will there be a new updated vaccine, or the same bivalent vaccine?
- How much COVID-19 testing is being done in Australia now? It seems like there is none being done currently in Ontario.
- Are COVID-19 cases so low in Australia because no one is testing anymore?
- Do you have any additional information about the risk of stroke for people over 65 who have had a bivalent vaccine?

- Does the current bivalent vaccine offer any protection against the XBB.1.16 variant?
- If a person is high-risk and their next booster is due within the next month, should they get it now or wait until the fall?
- Are there any plans to supply family doctors with RATs?
- Should we still ask patients/families to mask in our office?
- Do I have to wear a mask to see a patient whose pre-screen was negative?
- How do I advise a 75-year-old patient who calls me with possible COVID-19, who might need Paxlovid, but can't get a RAT at the local pharmacy anymore?
- Any thought on the use of metformin for Long COVID based on a recent study? Is there an organization (e.g., PHO) that will be looking at this data to provide treatment guidelines on this?
- How reliable is a negative RAT?
- What are your thoughts on studies showing significant Long COVID reduction with a two-week course of metformin?
- Is there an OHIP code for in office use of a RAT?
- I want my patients to do a RAT at home instead of coming into my office to get one. So, why are the tests not freely available after June 30?
- Where will remdesivir be available? Now that COVID-19 treatment centers have closed, where should we direct eligible patients?