

2023-24 Respiratory Illness Season

COVID-19 Testing — Antiviral Treatments for COVID-19 and Influenza

Information current as of September 20, 2023, updates anticipated in the coming weeks.

Access to COVID-19 Testing

- **Rapid Antigen Testing:**

- ✓ In a [September 18 Memo, the Ministry of Health](#) suggested that health care providers order and provide rapid antigen tests (RATs) to patients keep on hand to make testing and treatment more accessible.
- ✓ If not yet enrolled in Provincial Antigen Testing Program (PASP), enroll through the [Ontario Together Portal](#), and order via the [PPE Supply Portal](#).
- ✓ Individuals can access [RATs at Public Health Units and participating pharmacies](#).

- **PCR Testing:**

- ✓ Available for high-risk patients at participating community labs, pharmacies and at the 30 remaining clinical assessment centres.
- ✓ Individuals can [check to see if they are eligible](#) and use the [PCR testing locator tool](#) to find their nearest location or use the Ministry of Health's [online screening tool](#) to determine if they are eligible for PCR testing and antiviral treatment.
- ✓ The [OMA has a guide for community-based practices offering PCR testing](#).

- **Rapid Molecular Testing:**

- ✓ 134 active ID NOW [sites](#) offering testing in Ontario with 86 sites in the North region offering access to molecular testing in areas without easy access to lab-based testing.

Consider participating in the [Public Health Ontario's Sentinel Practitioner Surveillance Network \(SPSN\)](#) to help monitor respiratory pathogen activity in your community.

Antivirals

Patients at higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19 and influenza should be seen as soon as possible to benefit from antiviral treatments. Engage with high-risk patients before they get sick during regular appointments to ensure they know what to do to receive the appropriate therapeutic within the treatment window if they get sick.

Influenza Antivirals

When influenza is circulating in the community, oseltamivir or zanamivir therapy is recommended for children and adults with influenza-like illnesses **who are at higher risk of complications, have progressive symptoms, or who are hospitalized**.

Antivirals for flu work best when initiated as soon as possible and ideally within 48 hours of symptom onset, but treatment initiation beyond the 48-hour window may be considered. **Lab confirmation of influenza is not required to start treatment.**

Public Health Ontario's resource [Antiviral Medications for Seasonal Influenza](#) (December 2022) summarizes AMMI recommendations. An updated version is planned for fall 2023.



Make every effort to identify and connect with your higher-risk patient within 24 hours of patient seeking assessment for respiratory illness symptoms.

[OCFP's Screening for Respiratory Illness Symptoms](#) can help front office staff identify high-risk patients with respiratory illness symptoms and prioritize appointments to ensure timely access to antiviral treatments for influenza and COVID-19.

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Covid-19 Antivirals

- ✓ **Patients must be at high risk** for hospitalization or death due to COVID-19. However, eligibility is ultimately based on prescriber's clinical discretion and risk-benefit assessment.
- ✓ **A COVID-19 diagnosis is required** prior to initiating antiviral therapy (positive PCR, rapid molecular, or rapid antigen test).
- ✓ COVID-19 antivirals are **free to anyone with a prescription**.

Paxlovid

- ✓ **Preferred first-line therapy.**
- ✓ Must be initiated within **5 days** of symptom onset.
- ✓ Approved for **high-risk adults**.
- ✓ Can be prescribed by physician, nurse practitioner or participating pharmacist.

⚠ Interacts with many commonly used medications and natural health products. Requires careful risk assessment and collaboration with pharmacist and/or specialists (e.g., transplant, oncology) to assess for contraindications and manage drug interactions.

Identifying High-Risk Patients

Ontario Health guidance defines high-risk patients as follows:

- Adults **≥ 60 years of age**.
- Adults who are **immunocompromised**, regardless of age, vaccine status, or prior infections.
- **Unvaccinated or not up to date on boosters.**
- Adults with **one or more high-risk medical conditions**.
- **Individuals who are at a higher risk of poor outcomes from COVID-19 based on social determinants of health** including: Indigenous people, Black people, other members of racialized communities, people who are underhoused, individuals with intellectual, developmental, or cognitive disability, people who use substances regularly and/or live with mental health conditions.

Remdesivir

- ✓ **Indicated where Paxlovid is contraindicated** (e.g., drug-drug interaction that cannot be safely managed, medical contraindication) **or** when patients are **beyond the treatment window for Paxlovid** (> 5 days).
- ✓ Must be initiated within **7 days** of symptom onset.
- ✓ Approved for **high-risk adults** and **pediatric patients > 40 kg**.

⚠ Only available as an IV formulation which requires nursing support to administer on three consecutive days.

- ✓ Remdesivir is available through Home and Community Care Support Services (HCCSS).
- ✓ **Find referral forms here.**
- ✓ HCCSS care coordinators will follow up with your patient.
- ✓ Patients will receive IV therapy through infusions at a community nursing clinic; at-home service may be provided if required.

Ontario Health **Resources on COVID-19 Treatments**, including newly published guidance on:

- **Access to antiviral treatments for COVID-19 in the community** (September 15, 2023)
- **Ontario Health Recommendations for Outpatient Use of Intravenous Remdesivir in Adults** (September 15, 2023)

Centre for Effective Practice has **guidance on the outpatient management of patients with COVID-19**.

