

COVID-19 Fall Preparedness Plan: Testing Guidelines

September 24, 2020 Announcement – Q&As – Updated September 25

Key Messages

- Ontario has adhered to public health measures and established a strong foundation for testing and case and contact management that allowed to rapidly identify and contain any COVID-19 outbreaks.
- Ontario established a provincial COVID-19 lab network with capacity for more than 40,000 daily tests.
- The Ontario government continues to work to provide people with convenient and timely access to free COVID-19 testing across the province.
- In consultation with health experts and the Ontario's Testing Strategy Expert Panel, the CMOH recommended Ontario update testing guidelines to prioritize those who are at the greatest risk, while shifting away from untargeted asymptomatic testing.
- To expand testing capacity beyond the province's assessment centres, starting Friday, September 25, up to 60 pharmacies sites in Ontario will begin offering testing by appointment only for Ontarians who have no COVID-19 symptoms, within provincial testing guidance. Additional locations will be available in the continuing provincial rollout.
- Starting on September 25, Ontarians can get tested for COVID-19 at up to 60 pharmacies if they are:
 - not showing symptoms,
 - Eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative as determined by the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Long-Term Care
- Population groups that can currently access a test at a pharmacy, if asymptomatic include:
 - Residents or workers in long-term care homes
 - Visitors to a long-term care home
 - Residents or workers in homeless shelters
 - International students that have passed their 14 day quarantine period
 - Farm workers
 - Indigenous communities
- Targeted testing populations may change from time to time and individuals should confirm eligibility with their health care provider before testing.
- Ontarians should only seek testing at **assessment centres** if they are:
 - Showing COVID-19 symptoms;

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- Your public health unit or the COVID Alert app notifies you that you have been exposed to a confirmed case of the virus
 - You live or work in a setting that has a COVID-19 outbreak, as identified by the local public health unit.
 - Eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative as determined by the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Long-Term Care
- Population groups that can currently access a test at an assessment centre if they are asymptomatic include:
 - Residents or workers in long-term care homes
 - Visitors to a long-term care home
 - Residents or workers in homeless shelters
 - International students that have passed their 14 day quarantine period
 - Farm workers
 - Indigenous communities
 - Other setting-specific populations, as outlined in CMOH guidance (e.g., asymptomatic cancer patients).
 - Targeted testing populations may change from time to time and individuals should confirm eligibility with their health care provider before seeking testing.
 - Ontarians should continue to follow COVID-19 public health measures, including wearing a face covering, frequent handwashing, and maintaining physical distance from those outside their household or social circle.

Q&As

1. Why are you updating the province testing guidance?

To help address increase demands for COVID-19 testing. With the upcoming flu and cold season approaching, we need to ensure Ontario's publicly-funded testing resources are available for those who need them the most and explain who should get tested and where. That's why we need to update the testing guidelines as we are making changes and prioritizing those who are at the greatest risk, while shifting away from untargeted asymptomatic testing.

Ontario continues to work with Ontario Health, local public health units and hospitals to expand testing locations based on local needs. This includes adding more locations where tests can be provided, such as primary care offices, at home for certain home and community care clients, and in pharmacies.

To ensure the province is well prepared to manage any increase in testing volumes, Ontario is expanding the capacity of the provincial lab network to process more tests and achieve provincial testing targets. This includes hiring more lab staff and professional staff and improving data quality through digitizing requisition forms and other automated features.

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2. Who should go to assessment centers to be tested?

Ontarians should only seek testing at assessment centres if they are:

- Showing COVID-19 symptoms;
 - Your public health unit or the COVID Alert app notifies you that you have been exposed to a confirmed case of the virus
 - You live or work in a setting that has a COVID-19 outbreak, as identified by the local public health unit.
 - Eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative as determined by the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Long-Term Care
- Population groups that can currently access a test at an assessment centre if they are asymptomatic include:
 - Residents or workers in long-term care homes
 - Visitors to a long-term care home
 - Residents or workers in homeless shelters
 - International students that have passed their 14 day quarantine period
 - Farm workers
 - Indigenous communities
 - Other setting-specific populations, as outlined in CMOH guidance (e.g., asymptomatic cancer patients).
 - Targeted testing populations may change from time to time and individuals should confirm eligibility with their health care provider before seeking testing.

3. When will testing be available at pharmacies?

Ontario will rollout up to 60 pharmacy sites beginning this week in preparation for further provincial rollout to follow.

4. Who will be eligible for testing at pharmacies?

Starting on September 25, Ontarians can get tested for COVID-19 at up to 60 pharmacies if they are:

- not showing symptoms,
 - Eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative as determined by the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Long-Term Care
- Population groups that can currently access a test at a pharmacy, if asymptomatic include:
 - Residents or workers in long-term care homes
 - Visitors to a long-term care home

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- Residents or workers in homeless shelters
 - International students that have passed their 14 day quarantine period
 - Farm workers
 - Indigenous communities
- Targeted testing populations may change from time to time and individuals should confirm eligibility with their health care provider before testing.

5. Why did you originally suggest everyone should go get tested only to roll it back?

As the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed, the province must also adapt its approach to testing. With the upcoming flu and cold season approaching, we need to ensure Ontario's publicly-funded testing resources are available for those who need them the most.

Publicly-funded testing will target those who are symptomatic, have had close contact with a confirmed case, are part of an outbreak investigation, and asymptomatic individuals who work or live in at-risk settings. Doing so will support access to testing for those who need it.

Testing will continue to be available on a targeted basis for specific asymptomatic individuals who are at greater risk due to their health condition or employment, at the direction of the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Long-Term Care. Evolving our testing guidance in this way will support timely access to testing for those who need it.

6. Is there a cost for the test in pharmacy?

No, there is no cost for the test in pharmacies. People who are asymptomatic can go to pharmacies if they are eligible according to provincial testing guidance, which focuses on those who are at higher risk due to their health or their work.

7. What protocols are being put in place to ensure those who are symptomatic are not going to pharmacies for tests?

The Ministry of Health is launching a program to expand specimen collection for COVID-19 testing of asymptomatic persons through Ontario pharmacies. This program will be available at up to 60 participating pharmacies beginning Friday, September 25, 2020. Provincial rollout will continue through the fall with the goal to have access across the province.

Individuals who are eligible according to Ontario's testing guidance and do not have symptoms of COVID-19 will be able to visit a participating pharmacy for free

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testing with or without a valid Ontario Health Card. Ontarians should visit <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-19-assessment-centres> to see which pharmacies are offering testing in their community.

Since pharmacy testing is for Ontarians who do not have any COVID-19 symptoms, as such, pharmacies will require a phone call prior to a visit to the pharmacy for testing, which will be by appointment only. The phone call serves as a pre-screen for eligibility prior to visiting the pharmacy. Patients experiencing COVID-19 symptoms will be redirected to a COVID-19 Assessment Centre or an emergency department if urgent. The ministry is actively working with the pharmacy sector on various items, including this requirement.

When visiting a pharmacy, Ontarians should be adhering to public health measures, including wearing a face covering, frequent handwashing and maintaining physical distance from those outside your household or social circle.

8. If you cannot get a test at a pharmacy where should you get tested?

People who are symptomatic should continue to go to an assessment centre for testing.

9. Are pharmacists prepared to administer tests? What quality standards will be followed?

Education and training for pharmacists are being developed by the Ontario Pharmacists Association to support pharmacists. Pharmacists must be competent in their practice and act in accordance with guidance of the Ontario College of Pharmacists, Ontario Health, Public Health Ontario and the Ministry of Health.

10. How many tests are expected to be completed per pharmacy? Will this really fix the long waits at assessment centres?

The purpose of this program is to increase access to COVID-19 testing for asymptomatic persons in Ontario who are eligible according to provincial testing guidance by expansion to select pharmacies for specimen collection. This approach aims to help alleviate the demand and wait times for COVID-19 testing in Ontario at the assessment centres.

Upon launch, the Ministry of Health will monitor and assess the impact of this program, as well as overall testing in Ontario. More pharmacies will eventually be included in the expansion of COVID-19 testing.

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The number of tests expected by pharmacy cannot be accurately estimated at this time.

11. What type of strain will this put on the labs for processing test results?

Laboratories in the COVID-19 Provincial Diagnostic Network are working together to review capacity to ensure lab tests are processed efficiently to meet the increased demand in testing. This includes redirecting the overflow of specimens from one lab to another as well as monitoring and managing limited testing supplies such as reagents.

Pharmacies are leveraging the network and the network is actively increasing capacity and sourcing testing. Ontario Health will work with participating pharmacies to ensure that specimens are processed as efficiently as possible.

12. When will testing be available at other locations like community labs?

Work is underway to evaluate COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) specimen collection at Community Lab Specimen Collection Centres.

13. Will there be priority queues for high-risk patients/frontline health care providers?

There are no priority queues for high-risk patients or frontline health care providers at this time. Ontarians should visit the [online Ontario assessment centre location finder](#) to find a convenient location to obtain a COVID-19 test.

14. Will the government be opening children only assessment centres?

There will be no assessment centres opening for children only at this time. Ontarians should visit the [online Ontario assessment centre location finder](#) to find their closest assessment centre that is offering testing for children.

15. Is the government going to authorize private at home out-of-OHIP testing?

Ontario continues to assess and evaluate testing technologies for COVID-19. The government is not authorizing this testing at this time.

16. What if I want to visit my loved one in a long-term care home and I'm not at risk? Can I still get tested?

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Yes, if you require a test for an indoor visit to a LTC home, you can visit an Assessment Centre or participating pharmacy.

As ministry guidance is updated, it will be posted to the ministry website. LTC home visitors should continue to check the ministry website to ensure they have current information about testing options and locations available to them.

17. Will Ontario continue to proactively test several priority groups?

The government is working to ensure Ontario's publicly-funded testing resources are available for those who need them the most. That's why we are updating the testing guidelines and prioritizing those who are at the greatest risk, while shifting away from untargeted asymptomatic testing.

Residents or workers in an at-risk setting such as a long-term care home, homeless shelter or other congregate settings, and those eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative directed by the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Long-Term Care will continue to be eligible for testing.

18. What if my employer is asking me to get tested?

Provincial guidance does not recommend testing of asymptomatic workers beyond those in specific at-risk settings such as a long-term care homes, homeless shelters or other congregate settings. Specific at-risk settings or groups eligible for publicly-funded testing will be identified based on CMOH guidance, which will continue to evolve in response to the pandemic.

If employers or organizations choose to conduct private testing as part of their operations, they assume any operational, medical, and/or legal responsibilities relating to this initiative. Provincial guidance is available to organizations on privately-initiated testing.

19. What if I need to travel out of Canada and a negative COVID test is required by the jurisdiction I am travelling to?

As an interim measure, travelers who are asymptomatic and require a test to confirm that they do not have COVID-19 before travelling internationally can visit an Assessment Centre or make an appointment at a participating pharmacy. As ministry guidance is updated, it will be posted on the ministry website. Travelers

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should continue to check the ministry website to ensure they have current information about testing options and locations available to them.

To find a convenient location to obtain a COVID-19 test at an Assessment Centre or Pharmacy please visit [online Ontario Assessment Centre location finder](#). The finder will continue to be updated as additional Assessment Centres and pharmacies rollout.

20. What if I need a negative COVID test within a specific period of time?

The Ministry of Health cannot guarantee that COVID-19 tests results will be available - to patients or to travelers - within a specific period of time. The government is bringing additional testing sites online, and is working to increase access for testing to those who need it most.

To find a convenient location to obtain a COVID-19 test at an Assessment Centre or Pharmacy please visit [online Ontario Assessment Centre location finder](#). The finder will continue to be updated as additional Assessment Centres and pharmacies rollout.

21. What about International Students who need to be tested?

As per direction provided by the Minister of Colleges and Universities to Ontario's Designated Learning Institutions on August 15, 2020 and reconfirmed on September 2, 2020, Ontario is requiring that institutions ensure that both international and domestic students who are in quarantine as a result of having entered Canada within two weeks prior to the start of their studies are tested for the COVID-19 virus at least once during their quarantine period.

International Students will continue to qualify for publicly funded testing, and will be able to access a test at participating pharmacies, as well as Assessment Centres.

International Students should continue to check the ministry website to ensure they have current information about testing options and locations available to them.

22. What is a 'high-risk population?

Asymptomatic individuals from certain high-risk populations may be considered for testing. This includes workers and residents of high-risk settings such as long-term care homes, visitors of long-term care homes, workers and residents of

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homeless shelters and other congregate settings. These individuals should be directed to seek testing at an [approved specimen collection location](#).

This may also include any individual identified as part of a targeted testing campaign as directed by the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Long-Term Care, or by local public health.

23. What about home and community care workers, or a PSW that is working in a LTC home?

Home and Community Care Sector workers (and PSWs) that are going into LTC homes follow the same testing directive for staff in LTC homes.

They are eligible for asymptomatic testing at an assessment centre or participating pharmacy.

24. What do you mean by ‘other congregate setting’?

The current list of congregate settings that would be considered eligible for public testing under the category ‘asymptomatic at increased risk’ include:

- Long-Term Care Homes *specific ministry policy on this
- Retirement Homes *no formal ministry policy
- Homeless Shelters *no formal ministry policy
- Residential Treatment Centres *no formal ministry policy
- Adult Development Service Centres *no formal ministry policy

25. How will I know if I am part of an outbreak investigation? And where would I go for a test?

Asymptomatic workers and residents at specific outbreak sites may be considered for testing at the direction of public health.

These individuals should be directed to seek testing at an assessment centre.

26. Are Indigenous Communities still able to access asymptomatic testing?

Yes, Indigenous communities are still eligible for testing at an assessment centres or participating pharmacies if they are not showing symptoms.

27. Teachers / EDU workers – do they fall into the ‘asymptomatic-at increased risk’ testing category?

No, at the moment teachers or education workers do not fall into the ‘asymptomatic-at increased risk’ category, and are not eligible for a test unless they are demonstrating symptoms, are a close contact of a positive case, or are directly involved in an outbreak management effort.

28. What’s a targeted testing campaign, and how will I know if I am part of one? Is this something I can apply for?

Targeted testing initiatives are time-limited, risk-based, and designed to teach us more about transmission of COVID-19 in a specific setting.

The government launched a series of targeted testing initiatives in Spring 2020, to learn more about risk levels and transmission patterns in specific settings. For example, there was targeted testing conducted in manufacturing settings, in farms, and in congregate settings such as long-term care homes.

MOH determines eligibility for targeted testing in partnership with relevant ministries and based on public health advice.

29. What is the definition of “close contact of a confirmed case.” Can I still access a test if I’ve been in contact with someone symptomatic (but not yet a confirmed case)?

Patients may be informed that they are a close contact of a confirmed case through their local public health unit, or through the COVID Alert app.

Otherwise, patients should contact their health provider to confirm if they are eligible for a test.

30. Will AC’s and pharmacies turn people away for tests?

Yes, ACs and pharmacies will now be turning people away for tests, as per the CMOH guidance. This is to help ensure that our provincial testing capacity is used for the best purpose possible, and that testing remains a helpful tool in reducing the spread of COVID-19.

Asymptomatic travellers requiring a test for international travel clearance can still access a test at an AC or participating pharmacy, however this is an interim measure.

31. What if the screening determines that patient should be streamed to another site – will they be redirected? What is the consistent guidance on this across the province for both ACs and pharmacies?

Yes, if the screening process determines a patient should be streamed to another site, they will be redirected.

As additional sites come online over the coming weeks, it is possible that an assessment centre is the only option for testing within a particular geography. If there is no other testing site within a reasonable distance, the assessment centre can conduct the test.