

COVID-19 Fall Preparedness Plan: Testing Guidelines September 24, 2020 Announcement – Q&As – Updated October 21

Distribution: These QAs can be shared with Ontario Health and their regional leads, participating pharmacies, and throughout the Ministry of Health.

Key Messages

- Ontario has adhered to public health measures and established a strong foundation for testing and case and contact management that allows us to rapidly identify and contain COVID-19 outbreaks.
- Ontario has established a provincial COVID-19 lab network with capacity for more than 50,000 daily tests, as of mid-October.
- The Ontario government continues to work to provide people with convenient and timely access to publicly-funded COVID-19 testing across the province.
- In consultation with health experts and 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 broad asymptomatic testing.
- To expand testing capacity beyond the province’s Assessment Centres, starting Friday, September 25, participating pharmacies in Ontario began 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.
- As of October 20th, Ontarians can get tested for COVID-19 at up to 150 pharmacies if they are:
 - Not showing symptoms AND
 - Eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative as determined by the Ministry of Health, in partnership with other ministries
- Population groups identified for targeted testing by the ministries that can currently access a test at a **pharmacy**, if asymptomatic, include:
 - Residents or workers in long-term care homes
 - Visitors to long-term care homes
 - Residents or workers in homeless shelters or other congregate settings (e.g. retirement homes, group homes, community supported living, disability-specific communities/congregate settings, short-term rehab, hospices, and other shelters.)
 - International students that have passed their 14-day quarantine period
 - Farm workers
 - Individuals who self-identify as Indigenous
 - Individuals who need testing for international travel clearance

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- Individuals who are eligible according to Ontario’s testing guidance and do not have symptoms of COVID-19 are able to schedule a visit at a participating pharmacy for publicly-funded 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.
- Ontarians should seek testing only at **Assessment Centres** if:
 - They are showing COVID-19 symptoms
 - Their public health unit or the COVID Alert app notifies them that they have been exposed to a confirmed case of the virus
 - They live or work in a setting that has a COVID-19 outbreak, as identified by the local public health unit
 - They are eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative as determined by the Ministry of Health in partnership with other ministries
- Population groups identified for targeted testing as above 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 long-term care homes
 - Residents or workers in homeless shelters or other congregate settings (e.g. retirement homes, group homes, community supported living, disability-specific communities/congregate settings, short-term rehab, hospices, and other shelters.)
 - International students that have passed their 14-day quarantine period
 - Farm workers
 - Individuals who self-identify as Indigenous
 - Individuals who need testing for international travel clearance
 - Other setting-specific populations, as per Ministry of Health’s COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance
- 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.

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Q&As

1. Why did you update the provincial testing guidance?

The government updated the provincial testing guidance to respond to recommendations from the Testing Strategy Expert Panel and in consideration of data from asymptomatic testing efforts which found broad asymptomatic testing unhelpful for containing the spread of COVID-19, and to help address increased 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 updated the testing guidelines as we are making changes and prioritizing those who are at the greatest risk, while shifting away from broad 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.

2. When will testing be available at pharmacies?

The rollout of testing in pharmacies began on September 25.

As of October 20th, up to 150 pharmacies are offering COVID-19 testing to eligible individuals.

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3. What if the screening determines that patients 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.

The Ministry of Health is working with all relevant partners to ensure testing guidance is applied consistently across the province.

4. 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. Results from asymptomatic testing initiatives in the Spring found broad asymptomatic testing unhelpful for containing the spread of COVID-19.

Publicly-funded testing will remain available to all Ontarians who are symptomatic, have had close contact with a confirmed case, are part of an outbreak investigation, and for some asymptomatic individuals. Doing so will support access to testing for those who need it most.

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, in partnership with other ministries. Evolving our testing guidance in this way will support timely access to testing for those who need it.

5. Do individuals have to pay for the test in pharmacy?

No, individuals do not pay 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 environment.

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

To ensure that only asymptomatic individuals eligible for testing visit pharmacies for testing, pharmacies are screening patients by phone, prior to a visit to the pharmacy for testing.

Testing is being conducted 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 to ensure that public health guidelines are followed to ensure the safety of all pharmacy staff and patrons.

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. Patients will also be screened for symptoms on the day of their appointment when they arrive at the pharmacy.

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

Education and training for pharmacists are available through the Ontario Pharmacists Association. Pharmacists must be competent in their practice and act in accordance with guidance from the Ontario College of Pharmacists, Ontario Health, Public Health Ontario and the Ministry of Health.

8. 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.

On average, pharmacies are performing approximately 20 tests per day.

9. 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, if required, as well as monitoring and managing limited testing supplies such as reagents.

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

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

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

11. Is there a minimum age for children to access pharmacy testing?

There is no age minimum for access to pharmacy testing. However, pharmacies/pharmacists may use their discretion to determine whether their store will implement age limitations, based on the comfort of pharmacists performing the tests.

12. 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.

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

Ontario continues to assess and evaluate testing technologies for COVID-19.

14. 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

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testing guidelines and prioritizing those who are at the greatest risk, while shifting away from broad asymptomatic testing.

Residents or workers in an at-risk setting such as LTC homes, retirement homes, homeless shelters or other congregate settings, and those eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative directed by the Ministry of Health in partnership with other ministries (e.g., MCU, MSA, LTC) will continue to be eligible for testing. Refer to Q.29 for a definition of congregate setting.

15. 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 and turnaround times for testing to those who need it most.

To find the nearest Assessment Centre or a participating pharmacy, please visit [online Ontario Assessment Centre location finder](#). The finder will continue to be updated as additional Assessment Centres and pharmacies roll out.

16. 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.

17. 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.

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18. 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.

19. Will Assessment Centres and pharmacies turn people away for tests?

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

Asymptomatic travelers requiring a test for international travel clearance can still access testing at an Assessment Centre or participating pharmacy; however, please note that this is an interim measure.

20. 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. Anyone who is eligible for a test is equally eligible for that test.

Frontline health care providers are not part of a targeted testing campaign and do not qualify for asymptomatic testing outside of the eligibility criteria. High-risk patients and health care providers can be tested according to provincial guidance.

21. Who should go to Assessment Centers to be tested?

Ontarians should seek testing only at **Assessment Centres** if:

- They are showing COVID-19 symptoms
- Their public health unit or the COVID Alert app notifies them that they have been exposed to a confirmed case of the virus
- They live or work in a setting that has a COVID-19 outbreak, as identified by the local public health unit

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- They are eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative as determined by the Ministry of Health in partnership with other ministries

Population groups identified for targeted testing by the ministries 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, or other congregate settings (e.g. retirement homes, group homes, community supported living, disability-specific communities/congregate settings, short-term rehab, hospices, and other shelters.)
- International students that have passed their 14-day quarantine period
- Farm workers
- Individuals who self-identify as Indigenous
- Individuals who need testing for international travel clearance
- Other setting-specific populations, as per Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Provincial Testing Guidance

Targeted testing populations may change from time to time and individuals should confirm eligibility with their health care provider before seeking testing.

22. Who is eligible for testing at pharmacies?

Starting on September 25, Ontarians can get tested for COVID-19 if they are:

- Not showing symptoms AND
- Eligible for testing as part of a targeted testing initiative as determined by the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Long-Term Care, or Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

Population groups identified for targeted testing by the ministries that can currently access a test at a pharmacy, if asymptomatic include:

- Residents or workers in long-term care homes
- Visitors to long-term care homes
- Residents or workers in homeless shelters or other congregate settings (e.g. retirement homes, group homes, community supported living, disability-specific communities/congregate settings, short-term rehab, hospices, and other shelters.)
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23. What if I want to visit my loved one in a long-term care (LTC) home and I do not consider myself to be at risk? Can I still get tested?

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. LTC home visitor policy may vary across different regions.

24. 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 the [provincial testing guidance](#), which will continue to evolve in response to the pandemic.

The government does not recommend any private testing outside of the provincial testing guidance.

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

To find the nearest Assessment Centre or a participating pharmacy, please visit [online Ontario Assessment Centre location finder](#). The finder will continue to be

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updated as additional Assessment Centres and pharmacies roll out.

26. 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, and October 20, 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 after their quarantine period.

International Students will continue to qualify for publicly-funded testing and will be able to access a test at participating pharmacies after the 14-day quarantine period if asymptomatic, as well as Assessment Centres at any time if the student is demonstrating symptoms.

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

27. What is a 'high-risk population'?

This definition is included in the [provincial testing guidance document](#). 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 and retirement homes, visitors of long-term care homes, workers and residents of 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 in partnership with other ministries, or by local public health.

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28. What about home and community care workers, or a PSW that is working in a LTC home or a retirement 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 and retirement homes.

They are eligible for asymptomatic testing at an Assessment Centre or participating pharmacies.

29. 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 the following settings in addition to what is explicitly referenced in the guidance document:

- Long-Term Care Homes *specific ministry policy on this, communicated in July 16 memo
- Retirement Homes *no separate ministry policy, following LTC policy outlined in July 16 memo (testing staff every two weeks).
- Residential Treatment Centres *no formal ministry policy
- Adult Development Service Centres *no formal ministry policy

The Provincial Testing Guidance (Sept 24) includes the following definition of congregate setting: “homeless shelters, group homes, community supported living, disability-specific communities/congregate settings, short-term rehab, hospices, and other shelters.” Retirement homes should be considered included in this definition of ‘congregate setting.’

Correctional facilities should follow sector-specific guidance on testing.

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

Yes, Indigenous communities, or people who self-identify as Indigenous, are still eligible for testing at an Assessment Centres or participating pharmacies if they are not showing symptoms.

31. What about health care workers that are flying into northern communities to provide health care services to First Nations and Indigenous communities – are they eligible for asymptomatic testing?

Yes, health care workers that are travelling into northern and remote communities to provide health care services to First Nations and Indigenous communities are eligible for asymptomatic testing at assessment centres.

As participating pharmacy locations come online in the north, health care workers that that are travelling into northern and remote communities to provide health care services will also be eligible for asymptomatic testing at these locations.

Asymptomatic non-health workers that are entering First Nations and Indigenous communities are eligible for testing at the discretion of the local Assessment Centre.

32. 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 otherwise directed by local public health.

33. Can I be turned away for testing at an Assessment Centre if I am an asymptomatic cancer patient?

Yes, this is a possible scenario. As per the latest [provincial testing guidance](#), routine testing for all asymptomatic cancer patients is no longer recommended; it is now at the discretion of regional COVID response committees and the discretion of the testing physician, as outlined in Appendix A of the provincial testing guidance.

Asymptomatic cancer patients that meet the eligibility requirements for testing should be tested at an Assessment Centre. Asymptomatic cancer patients are not eligible for testing at participating pharmacy locations.

34. Do I still require a COVID-19 test before a scheduled surgery, and where should I go for this test if I'm not showing symptoms?

The guidance on testing requirements prior to a scheduled (non-urgent/emergent surgery) are outlined in the [COVID-10 Provincial Testing Guidance](#) document, in 'priority populations' section under 'hospitals'.

The COVID-19 regional steering committee or response table is responsible for reviewing local epidemiology and conducting a risk assessment to determine when a test for this purpose is required. For regions where there is low community transmission, testing prior to a scheduled surgical procedure is not required.

Where community transmission is not low, any patient with a scheduled surgical procedure requiring a general anaesthetic should be tested 24-48 hours prior to procedure date.

Testing for this purpose should be provided at an Assessment Centre, and not at a participating pharmacy, even if the patient is asymptomatic.

This section of the testing guidance applies for all settings providing surgery (not just hospitals).

35. If a patient is travelling from one community to a different community for surgery, what location requires the risk assessment?

The intent of the guidance is to evaluate the risk in the community where the person resides/works, as that is the part that determines their actual risk when coming into a hospital or facility.

For example: someone coming to Toronto (a high-risk community) from a community that has few or no reported cases of COVID-19 would not require a COVID-19 test to be performed pre-operatively.

36. What about healthcare workers or first responders? Can they access a test if they are not showing symptoms?

First responders and other healthcare workers are eligible for asymptomatic testing if they are a close contact of a positive case or identified through outbreak management efforts. If healthcare workers are demonstrating symptoms they are eligible for testing. Healthcare workers that meet the eligibility criteria will not be prioritized for access to testing at any testing site.

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37. The guidance includes a section on facility transfers, does this section also apply to individuals moving from the community into a facility (i.e. not facility-to-facility transfers)?

Yes. Asymptomatic individuals that are moving into a facility are eligible for testing at a participating pharmacy or Assessment Centre.

38. The guidance provides some examples of which facilities are included, but not a comprehensive list. Are residential treatment facilities included?

Yes. Asymptomatic individuals entering a residential treatment facility, retirement home or LTC home, or other congregate living setting are eligible for asymptomatic testing at a participating pharmacy or Assessment Centre. The list of facilities included in the guidance document are: hospital, long-term care home, retirement home or other congregate living setting/institution (including group homes and equivalent higher-risk settings), community hospitals and regional tertiary/quaternary centres or acute sites to post-acute sites within a multi-site organization.

The definition of ‘congregate setting’ is included in Q29.

39. Are home and community care workers working in congregate settings eligible for asymptomatic testing? What about a home care worker that is going into an individual’s home to provide service?

Yes, all asymptomatic workers in a congregate setting are eligible for testing at a participating pharmacy or Assessment Centre.

Home care workers providing care in an individual’s home are not eligible for asymptomatic testing.