

# Frequently Asked Questions

## Enhanced masking at AHS Acute Care Facilities

March 2024

The following information is meant to address questions you may have about Alberta Health Services (AHS) [Use of Masks to Prevent Transmission of COVID-19 Directive](#).

### 1. When can a site remove enhanced masking?

- This directive supports zone and site leadership will work together to determine if enhanced masking is necessary, and can include patient care areas, elevators/staircases/hallways, common areas, gift shops, and cafeterias where patient contact could occur in acute care facilities.
- Decisions to remove enhanced masking will be based on several factors which consider number, size and impact of outbreaks, new hospitalizations with COVID-19, occupancy, test positivity, and situational context.
- The safety of our patients and our people remains our priority.
- We will continue to monitor the need for masking to reduce the risk of COVID-19.

### 2. Who does this directive apply to?

- This directive applies to all AHS staff, physicians, volunteers, students, contracted service providers, and Alberta Precision Laboratories workers in patient care and patient-facing areas such as elevators/staircases/hallways, common areas, gift shops, and cafeterias where patient contact could occur in acute care facilities. This includes continuing care sites that are co-located in the identified sites.
- Patients and visitors are not required to wear a mask in these areas; however, masking is required for patients, designated support persons and visitors in the emergency departments and labour and delivery assessment/triage areas in those identified sites.
- No patient shall be denied services.
- Wearing a mask is optional for AHS workers when they are in an area where there is no contact with patients (staff break rooms/meeting rooms, corporate settings, health records departments).
- Masking is also optional at continuing care and Addiction and Mental Health settings that are not within an acute care site. We continue to respect the choice to voluntarily wear a mask in all areas and encourage those who want to wear a mask to do so.

### 3. Where do I need to wear a mask when the directive is implemented?

- AHS workers are required to mask in acute care areas where there is direct patient care. Please speak with your site leader for site-specific guidance.
- This includes masking in patient areas where AHS workers may come into contact with patients including elevators/staircases/hallways, common areas, gift shops and cafeterias.
- This also includes continuing care sites that are co-located in the identified sites.

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- Many individuals seeking care at AHS sites — in particular emergency departments, urgent care centres, labour and delivery assessment/triage areas and advanced ambulatory care centres — are more vulnerable and at greater risk to severe outcomes from COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses.
- Implementing enhanced masking will protect the capacity of our system. See the [guide for making masking work for you](#). Those who are unable to mask should speak with their manager, as per the [AHS Workplace Accommodation Policy](#).
- The latest updates on enhanced masking are available [online](#).

## 4. Why am I required to wear a mask?

- Healthcare professionals have a unique responsibility to protect their own health as well as the wellbeing of those around them who may be at risk.
- Many individuals seeking care at AHS sites are more vulnerable to severe outcomes from COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses.
- Evidence shows that wearing a mask [reduces the chance of spread of respiratory viruses](#). This is particularly important as a strategy to protect patients who are at higher risk for severe outcomes from infection, as well as healthcare workers who provide care and to help maintain the capacity of our healthcare system.
- Masking is one of many control measures that work together to prevent the spread of infection and has been used for many years when hospital units have had respiratory virus outbreaks.

## 5. Where is masking optional?

- Wearing a mask is optional for AHS people when they are in an area where there is no contact with patients (e.g., staff break rooms/meeting rooms, corporate settings, health records departments.).
- Masking is also optional in areas when enhanced masking is not in place at your site.
- Masking is optional at continuing care and Addiction and Mental Health settings that are not within an acute care facility.

## 6. What role does the Medical Officer of Health play when it comes to masking?

- The Medical Officer of Health retains the authority to enact masking as a response to an outbreak as outlined in the Communicable Disease Control Outbreak Guidelines and at the discretion of the outbreak management team.
- Masking requirements during an outbreak continue to be available as a tool regardless of whether enhanced masking measures is in effect at a site.
- As always, workers should continue to use Routine Practices and Additional Precautions as required by the IPC Risk Assessment to make personal protective equipment (PPE) decisions.

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## 7. An outbreak has been declared at my site. What do I do?

- Please continue to follow the same outbreak measures in place as outlined by the [AHS Guide for Outbreak Prevention and Control in Acute Care Sites](#) (endorsed by AH).
- Patients are monitored for respiratory viral symptoms such as fever/cough/runny nose at least three times daily.
- Patients who are symptomatic, based on new or changed symptoms, are tested for COVID-19 and placed on contact and droplet precautions.
- Any asymptomatic testing of patients is directed by IPC as necessary to monitor for effectiveness of outbreak measures and to manage isolation resources and cohorting practices. This is critical for protecting vulnerable patients.

## 8. What is the difference between “continuous masking” and “enhanced masking”?

- Continuous masking is the term used when masking is required in outbreak situations along with continuous eye protection on the affected unit(s). This is mandated during outbreaks by the outbreak management team.
- Enhanced masking is the term used in the masking directive.

## 9. When else would masking be required?

- AHS people are still required to mask under the following circumstances:
  - When required by a Medical Officer of Health during an outbreak according to the Communicable Disease Control Outbreak Guidelines,
  - For staff, as identified by the [Attending Work with COVID-19 Symptoms or a Positive COVID-19 Test](#),
  - When a masking poster is posted on patient doors,
  - Or when in contact with a severely immunocompromised individual
- Additional PPE may be required based on the [Infection Prevention and Control Risk Assessment \(IPCRA\)](#) and the [Joint Statement: COVID-19 and Personal Protective Equipment](#).

## 10. Is physical distancing still required in areas where masking is not required?

- No, physical distancing is not required in areas where masking is not required.

## 11. How do I safely respond to harassment and violence when implementing enhanced masking in acute care facilities?

- Having a difference of opinion is a normal and expected part of [working together](#), and each of us has personal values and beliefs that influence how we act and respond to situations. See this additional [resource](#) to support you and your teams.
- Stay [respectful](#) and maintain a productive and professional relationship.

## 12. I have more questions. Who do I contact?

- Thank you for your patience as we work to update appropriate resources.

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- Please contact your local site leadership if you have questions.
- If you have additional questions, contact [ppe@ahs.ca](mailto:ppe@ahs.ca).