

November 28, 2022

MEMORANDUM TO: Retirement Homes

FROM: Jacqueline Cureton, Assistant Deputy Minister
Seniors and Accessibility Policy, Programs and Strategic
Partnerships
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility

Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario
Ministry of Health

SUBJECT: Advice to Retirement Home Operators on Vaccination and
Retirement Homes Respiratory Illness Safety

We are writing to provide an update on the status of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses in the retirement home sector and reinforce the importance of vaccines. In Ontario, we are seeing concerning trends with COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses, such as Influenza and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), creating further complexities for the upcoming months.

Since early October, the number of COVID-19 outbreaks and cases among retirement home residents has increased by 40%, resulting in the number of confirmed staff and resident cases surpassing 2,500 and the hospitalization of over 30 residents. Operators should plan to take steps towards keeping residents and workers healthy including ensuring homes are fully staffed as we navigate through this challenging respiratory illness season.

COVID-19 Bivalent Booster and Influenza Vaccine

In light of the three circulating viruses, we strongly encourage operators to ensure that residents and staff stay up to date with COVID-19 and Influenza vaccinations. Residents and staff should receive a bivalent booster if it has been **three months or longer since their last COVID-19 dose** and receive their annual Influenza vaccine.

To stay up to date with routine immunizations, it is important that those who are eligible get the COVID-19 bivalent booster. Safe and effective, vaccines are the best way to protect from infectious diseases and crucial to optimizing the health and well-being of residents. Vaccinated individuals are much less likely to get seriously ill, hospitalized and less likely to spread COVID-19 to others.

Retirement homes who have not finalized their vaccine plans are strongly encouraged to work with their local public health units (PHUs) or community pharmacy partners as soon as possible to schedule vaccine administration.

As a reminder, the bivalent COVID-19 vaccine may be administered at the same time as the Influenza vaccine, or at any time before or after an individual receives the Influenza vaccine.

Actions Operators Can Take to Protect Retirement Home Residents and Staff

To prevent transmission of infectious respiratory illnesses, operators can further reduce risk by putting into place controls that go above any minimum standards that apply to the workplace, including the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) and regulations and any public health orders.

Although controls can reduce the chance that a virus will spread between people, no single action or control measure is perfect all the time and combining or layering controls is a best practice recommended for congregate care settings such as retirement homes.

For instance, hand hygiene and wearing a mask are low-cost control measures that can be immediately effective at reducing both short and long-range COVID-19 transmission. Individuals at high risk for complications from any respiratory virus are strongly encouraged to wear a mask in indoor public spaces.

As Ontarians spend more time together indoors, retirement home operators are highly encouraged to:

- Share information with residents about how to access antiviral treatments, including [Paxlovid](#);
 - Antivirals can limit the severity of COVID-19 when taken early in the course of an infection and prevent hospitalizations. A patient handout translated into multiple languages is available from [Ontario Health](#) as an additional resource.
 - Paxlovid antiviral suitability depends on the clinical risk of the individual and **does not act as a replacement to COVID-19 vaccine/boosters**.
- Continue to inform retirement home visitors to stay at home if they are feeling sick and wear masks if they are recovering from recent illness.

- Emphasize the benefits of masking and ensure staff, students, volunteers and visitors are aware and complying with the [MSAA COVID-19 Guidance](#) on masking.
- Take steps to improve ventilation and air filtration as an additional precautionary layer that offers a level of protection for everyone inside the home.

If you need assistance connecting with available vaccine supports (GO-VAXX, a local pharmacy, your local PHU) or with implementing infection prevention and control guidance, please contact the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility at RHInquiries@ontario.ca.

Thank you again for your ongoing commitment and efforts to keep residents and staff safe.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

Jacqueline Cureton
Assistant Deputy Minister

Dr. Kieran Moore
Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario

- c: Nancy Matthews, Deputy Minister, Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility
Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health, Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health
Dr. Fareen Karachiwalla, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health, Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health
Alison Blair, Associate Deputy Minister, Pandemic Response and Recovery, Ministry of Health
Tim Lewis, Assistant Deputy Minister, Vaccine Strategy, Implementation and Performance, Ministry of Health
Jay O'Neill, Chief Executive Officer and Registrar, Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority
Cathy Hecimovich, Chief Executive Officer, Ontario Retirement Communities Association
Lisa Levin, Chief Executive Officer, AdvantAge Ontario