

September 24, 2024

MEMO TO: Retirement Home Operators and Licensees

FROM: Michèle Sanborn, Assistant Deputy Minister
Policy Programs and Strategic Partnerships Division
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility

SUBJECT: Fall 2024 Respiratory Illness Preparedness

I am writing to provide you with essential information and updated resources to help in your preparation for the upcoming fall respiratory season.

MSAA continues to work with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, Public Health (OCMOHPPH) to monitor and assess the risk of respiratory illnesses in retirement homes as the 2024/25 respiratory season commences. As of July 18, Public Health Ontario (PHO) upgraded the COVID-19 infection risk to moderate, noting an increase in infections across the province that is also being experienced nationally and internationally. With the approaching fall/winter respiratory virus season, the OCMOHPH is encouraging Ontarians, and particularly retirement home residents, to stay safe and prevent unnecessary visits to the hospital by staying up to date on all recommended vaccinations and taking recommended preventative measures.

Based on the last two years of concurrent circulation of respiratory illnesses and outbreaks, including influenza (flu), respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and COVID-19, MSAA recommends that licensees revisit their Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) programs to ensure readiness for the respiratory season.

It is important for retirement homes to be prepared to prevent and respond to a potentially higher prevalence of respiratory outbreaks this fall and winter. This memo outlines key actions to ensure readiness.

1. Vaccination

This fall, Ontario will continue the publicly funded respiratory vaccine programs, including the RSV vaccine program which has now been extended to include all retirement home residents.

Licensees are strongly encouraged to promote COVID-19, flu and RSV vaccines and their benefits¹ to all eligible residents, staff, and visitors, as per their obligations under the Retirement Homes Act, 2010 (RHA)². For the COVID-19 vaccine, the Ministry of Health (MOH) recommends that individuals at increased risk, including retirement home residents, receive an additional dose this fall with the new formulation of the vaccine. Details on the new formulation will be released in September. Evidence continues to suggest that infection and/or vaccine-acquired immunity wanes over time. The recommended interval is 6 months from the last dose or last infection and the minimum interval is 3 months.

All three vaccines can be co-administered, with availability following similar timelines to previous seasons. Licensees are encouraged to plan their vaccine administration as soon as possible.

COVID-19 and Flu Vaccine

Operators seeking independent vaccine administration are encouraged to work with their local Public Health Unit (PHU) for onboarding support, plan finalization, vaccine storage, and handling requirements. Operators unable to independently administer the vaccines should consider other methods such as working with a co-located long-term care home or a local provider (e.g., local pharmacy).

If after considering these resources, your retirement home is seeking supports to administer the COVID-19 and/or flu vaccine, please contact your local PHU or email MOH vaccine programs at vaccine.program@ontario.ca.

RSV Vaccine

Operators are encouraged to contact their local PHU for more information on the RSV vaccine program.

Pneumococcal Vaccine

In addition to the fall respiratory vaccines, MOH recommends that eligible residents consider the new product available through the publicly funded pneumococcal vaccine program.

¹ *Health Canada provides information on vaccine benefits: COVID-19, flu and RSV*

²*Licensees' obligations under the RHA include ensuring that residents, staff, and volunteers receive information about the advantages of an annual flu vaccination and where the vaccination is available.*

Other Vaccines

Information about all recommended publicly funded vaccines is available on the [Ontario's Routine Immunization Schedule](#) page.

2. Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC)

Licensees are reminded about their obligations under the RHA and the Regulation to ensure there are safety plans in place, including an IPAC program, to manage viral outbreaks. In conjunction with vaccinations, adherence to foundational IPAC practices, including IPAC training for staff and volunteers and information on how to reduce incidence of infectious disease for residents and families³ is crucial to mitigate the risk of outbreaks and spread of respiratory diseases.

In addition to the RHA requirements, the OCMOHPH issued an updated [memo](#) to the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority (RHRA) during April 2024 recommending that retirement homes follow the guidance listed below:

- [Recommendations for Outbreak Prevention and Control in Institutions and Congregate Living Settings](#); and
- [MSAA's COVID-19 Guidance Document for Retirement Homes in Ontario](#).

Retirement homes may also wish to consider the following resources to support IPAC implementation:

- [Respiratory Infection Outbreaks in Institutions and Public Hospitals](#) for specific information on respiratory diseases.
- [IPAC Checklist for Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes](#) to help guide individuals in conducting IPAC assessments related to COVID-19.
- [Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority \(RHRA Self-Assessment Tool\)](#) to assess readiness to prevent or effectively respond to a COVID-19 outbreak.
- [Environmental Cleaning Performance Observation Audit](#) to support staff in applying IPAC best practices when cleaning residents' spaces.

Further IPAC tools to support engagement with residents and families are provided in Appendix A.

Retirement homes who require additional IPAC support are encouraged to contact their IPAC Hub at IPACHubs@ontario.ca.

³*Licensees' obligations under the RHA include providing each resident and the resident's substitute decision-makers information about how to reduce the incidence of infectious disease, including the need for and method of proper hand hygiene and the need for and process of reporting infectious illness.*

3. Antiviral Treatments

Licensees are strongly encouraged to educate residents on accessing antiviral treatments, including Paxlovid and Remdesivir (for COVID-19) and Oseltamivir and Zanamivir (for flu). Ontario Health advises that antivirals can offer increased protection and limit the severity of illness when taken early in the course of an infection. Individuals aged 65 and over are among the high-risk groups eligible to be tested and assessed for COVID-19 antiviral treatments since they are at higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19.

Residents can call Health Connect Ontario at Health811 or 1-866-797-0007 (toll-free TTY) for more information on antiviral treatments, assistance, or eligibility for virtual care options.

4. Accessing Emergency Supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Testing Supplies

The PPE Supply Portal (PSP) will continue to facilitate orders for emergency supplies of PPE (excluding PCR swabs) this fall/winter season. Licensees should verify that they have adequate PPE supplies, and regularly check expiry dates. Operators may choose to use the PPE Burn Rate Calculator to plan and track their PPE inventory.

The PSP ordering tool offers efficient online access to quick reordering, product modifications or new orders, and real-time shipment tracking. Newly licensed retirement homes seeking registration should contact SCO.Supplies@ontario.ca.

While remaining inventories of rapid antigen tests may be used to support retirement homes, the recommended and preferred testing for residents with acute respiratory illness is polymerase chain reaction (PCR) based testing.

5. Staffing Contingency and Fallback Planning

It is expected that the upcoming fall/winter respiratory season will impact human resource capacity in retirement homes. Operators should review their staffing contingency plans and remind staff of the importance of staying home when sick. Key considerations for staff contingency planning are available in the RHRA Self-Assessment Tool.

6. Fall Preparedness Webinar

Similar to previous years, MSAA will host a webinar in collaboration with the Ontario Retirement Communities Association (ORCA) on respiratory season preparedness. The details of the webinar will be shared through RHRA and ORCA.

As always, I thank you for your efforts in keeping retirement home operations running smoothly while protecting the safety and well-being of retirement home residents and staff.

If you have any additional questions, please contact our team at RHinquiries@ontario.ca.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

Michèle Sanborn

- c: Melissa Thomson, Deputy Minister, Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility
- Dr. Michelle Murti, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health, Office of the Chief Medical Officer 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

Appendix A – ADDITIONAL IPAC RESOURCES

- PHO IPAC best practices providing the latest best practice documents.
- Cover Your Cough to support respiratory etiquette best practice,
- How to Handrub / How to Handwash to support hand hygiene best practice,
- Additional Precautions Signage and Lanyard Cards to help provide visual messaging regarding PPE usage and any additional precautions.
- Flu vaccine awareness resources and poster (targeting those over 65+)
- Immunize Canada COVID-19 awareness and promotional resources
- Immunize Canada RSV awareness and promotional resources