

September 28, 2026

MEMO TO: Retirement Home Operators and Licensees

FROM: Maureen Ennis, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister
Policy Programs and Strategic Partnerships Division
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility (MSAA)

SUBJECT: 2026/27 Respiratory Illness Preparedness

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

MSAA continues to work with the Office of Chief Medical Officer of Health, Public Health (OCMOH, PH) to monitor and assess the risk of respiratory illnesses in retirement homes as the 2026/27 respiratory season commences. This season, the risk from COVID-19, RSV and influenza (flu) is anticipated to be similar to previous respiratory seasons and to pre-pandemic years. Retirement homes should be prepared to respond to respiratory outbreaks, including having surge plans in place should activity exceed expected seasonal levels.

This memo outlines key actions to support that readiness.

1. Vaccination

Ontario will continue offering publicly funded respiratory vaccine programs for COVID-19, RSV, flu, and the pneumococcal vaccine. Information about all recommended publicly funded vaccines is available on [Ontario's Routine Immunization Schedule](#) page.

The [flu vaccine](#) must be promoted in accordance with the [Retirement Homes Act, 2010](#) (RHA), ensuring residents, staff, and volunteers are informed of its benefits and availability. Licensees are strongly encouraged to promote [COVID-19](#) and [RSV](#) vaccines to all eligible residents, staff, and visitors. All three (3) vaccines can be co-administered. Appendix A includes a fact sheet to support operators in their promotional efforts.

The availability of these vaccines will follow similar timelines to previous seasons, with rollout beginning in late September and extending into early October. Licensees are encouraged to plan their vaccine administration as soon as possible. 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 who are unable to independently administer vaccines should

consider other methods such as working with a co-located long-term care home or a local provider (e.g., [local community pharmacy](#)).

Retirement home residents can receive their COVID-19, influenza and RSV immunizations at participating pharmacies, through their local PHU, or from a participating primary care provider.

For questions, please contact your [local PHU](#) or email MOH's vaccine program at vaccine.program@ontario.ca.

A. COVID-19 and Flu Vaccines

The Ministry of Health (MOH) recommends that individuals at increased risk, including retirement home residents, receive a dose of the updated COVID-19 and flu vaccine this fall. Evidence shows that immunity from infection or vaccination fades over time and new variants continue to emerge. The minimum interval between doses or infection is three (3) months.

Starting this fall, health-care providers that wish to provide the COVID-19 vaccine must use Panorama Guided Workflow to manage COVID-19 vaccine inventory and record doses administered to meet reporting requirements under the *COVID-19 Vaccination Reporting Act, 2021*. For more information, contact PanoramaGuidedWorkflow@ontario.ca.

B. RSV Vaccine for Older Adults

RSV vaccines for older adults are now available through community pharmacies across the province. Operators are encouraged to contact their [local PHU](#) or community pharmacy for additional information. Evidence shows the adult RSV vaccine provides multi-year immunity. Residents who have already received a dose do not require another, while those who have not are encouraged to be vaccinated. Older adults may receive the RSV at any time during the year.

C. Pneumococcal Vaccine and Other Vaccines

In addition to the fall respiratory vaccines, MOH recommends that eligible residents consider vaccination available through the publicly funded [pneumococcal vaccine program](#).

2. Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC)

Licensees are reminded of their obligations under the RHA and its Regulation to maintain safety plans, including an IPAC program, to manage outbreaks. MSAA recommends that licensees review their IPAC programs to ensure readiness for the upcoming respiratory season.

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

- RHRA's Infection Prevention and Control Guidelines to support understanding of the requirements of select IPAC portions of the RHA and its Regulation.
- RHRA's Self-Assessment Tool to assess readiness to prevent or effectively respond to a respiratory outbreak.
- Infection Prevention and Control for Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes to prevent the transmission of infections, reduce the risk of outbreaks, and protect residents, staff, and visitors.
- The IPAC module for non-clinical staff, developed by Public Health Ontario (PHO), to strengthen staff knowledge and capacity on IPAC practices.
- Four Moments of Hand Hygiene to support hand hygiene best practices.

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

Licensees seeking additional IPAC support to prepare for the upcoming respiratory season are encouraged to contact their IPAC Hub. IPAC Hubs can proactively assist with outbreak management plans, work alongside retirement homes in IPAC assessments and audits, and provide other IPAC supports to strengthen IPAC programs and best practices. IPAC Hubs support from a position of influence and do not have any regulatory oversight over retirement homes or other congregate living settings. For assistance connecting with your IPAC Hub, please contact IPACHubs@ontario.ca.

3. Antiviral Treatments and Testing

Residents who develop respiratory symptoms should seek care as soon as possible, as antiviral treatments are most effective when started within 48 hours of symptom onset. Licensees are encouraged to ensure that testing kits, necessary supplies, and testing and antiviral requisitions are readily available to support a timely response for when residents become symptomatic.

Routine testing of asymptomatic residents is generally not required, unless symptoms develop or testing is recommended by the local PHU.

Licensees are strongly encouraged to educate residents on accessing antiviral treatments, including Paxlovid and Remdesivir (for COVID-19) and Oseltamivir and Zanamivir (inhalational only) (for flu), in the community. Depending on local availability, residents can access respiratory virus testing and/or treatment through several channels:

- Clinicians who provide care to the residents in the retirement home
- The resident's own primary care provider in the community (indicate that the individual is a resident of a retirement home on the [requisition form](#))
- Local walk-in clinics, urgent care clinics, and/or community health centres (indicate that the individual is a resident of a retirement home on the [requisition form](#))
- Local [pharmacists](#) may be able to prescribe COVID-19 and flu antivirals

Residents can call Health Connect Ontario at Health811 or 1-866-797-0007 (toll-free TTY) or their primary care provider for more information on antiviral treatments or support.

Additionally, local [Ontario Health Teams](#)/Primary Care Networks may be able to support homes and residents to access care in the community.

Retirement homes continue to have access to Rapid Antigen Tests for COVID-19 through the [Provincial Antigen Testing Program](#) to facilitate timely detection and access to antiviral treatment when appropriate.

Starting this respiratory season, retirement homes will no longer have access to multiplex PCR Testing through the Provincial Respiratory Virus Testing Program. Ontarians eligible for therapeutics can access COVID-19 testing in primary care settings. Acutely ill persons should continue to access care (including testing) in urgent/emergent settings as needed. See [here](#) for further details on COVID-19 testing eligibility and treatment.

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

The [PPE Supply Portal \(PSP\)](#) remains available for ordering emergency personal protective equipment (PPE). Licensees are responsible for maintaining adequate PPE supplies and monitoring expiry dates. If reporting expired products received from the PSP, please include a photo and relevant information. For assistance with account access, orders, shipments, or reporting expired products, contact SCO.Supplies@ontario.ca.

PPE obtained through the PSP must not be resold or distributed to other organizations, and licensees are expected to comply with all program terms and conditions. Operators may use the [PPE Burn Rate Calculator](#) to support PPE inventory planning and monitoring.

5. Staffing Contingency and Fallback Planning

It is expected that the upcoming fall/winter respiratory season will impact human resource capacity across the province, including retirement homes. As a reminder, licensees should encourage staff to stay home when they are sick and to follow local public health guidance for return to work. Licensees may also want to consider the following when developing or reviewing their staff contingency plans:

- Exploring opportunities to adjust staff schedules or shifts, and identifying staff availability for alternative shifts where needed;
- Assessing staff skills and experience to identify viable alternative roles; and
- Providing additional training or education to staff and volunteers, as appropriate, to support continuity of operations.

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 on October 8. 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

Maureen Ennis

c: Peter Kaftarian, Deputy Minister, Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility
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Appendix A – RESPIRATORY ILLNESS VACCINE FACT SHEET

This fact sheet includes information to support your understanding of vaccines during this respiratory season. Vaccination is one of the best ways to prevent serious illness, especially for older adults, and remains one of the most effective ways to reduce severe illness and outbreaks in retirement homes.

COVID-19 and Flu vaccines are strongly recommended for both staff and residents, while RSV vaccines are recommended for adults aged 75 and older and for adults aged 60 to 74 who live in a retirement home. If available, these vaccines can be administered at the same time. The RSV vaccine is available year-round for older adults and residents of retirement homes.

Vaccine Quick Facts:

1. **Annual Vaccines (COVID-19 and Flu):**

- It is strongly recommended that you receive the updated COVID-19 and flu vaccine even if you have previously had an infection or have already been vaccinated. In Ontario, individuals are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine dose in the fall if at least 3 months have passed since their last dose or since a confirmed COVID-19 infection.
- Vaccines take approximately 2 weeks to provide full protection. In Ontario, it is strongly recommended that retirement home staff and residents receive the flu and COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it becomes available each fall to ensure optimal protection throughout the respiratory virus season.
- Flu and COVID-19 vaccines used in Ontario are safe, effective, and closely monitored. Serious side effects are rare, and most people experience only mild, short-term symptoms such as soreness at the injection site, fatigue, or a mild fever.
- While there are multiple COVID-19 and influenza vaccine products available, the most important step is to get vaccinated. Receiving the first available vaccine helps ensure protection is in place as early as possible.
- These vaccines are available through your doctor, a nurse practitioner, or your local community pharmacy. For more information, please contact your local PHU.

2. **RSV Vaccine**

- The RSV vaccine helps reduce the risk of severe illness, complications, and hospitalization from this viral infection. Eligible individuals are recommended to receive a single dose, which provides protection over multiple seasons. If you have not yet received the RSV vaccine, it is strongly recommended that you do so. Older adults and retirement home residents may get the RSV vaccine at any time during the year.
- The RSV vaccine can be safely given at the same time as flu and COVID-19 vaccines.
- For more information, please contact your local PHU, community pharmacy, or primary care provider.

Appendix B – ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [How to Handrub / How to Handwash](#) to support hand hygiene best practice.
- [Cover Your Cough](#) to support respiratory etiquette best practice
- [Additional Precautions Signage and Lanyard Cards](#) to help provide visual messaging regarding PPE usage and any additional precautions.
- Respiratory infectious diseases awareness [resources](#)
- Immunize Canada Flu [resources](#)
- Immunize Canada COVID-19 [resources](#)
- Immunize Canada RSV [resources](#)