

# COVID-19 and Cancer Treatment

## Information for Patients & Families



This information is **specific to Alberta cancer patients**. Your main source of information on COVID-19 and health is at [Alberta.ca](https://alberta.ca) and [ahs.ca/COVID](https://ahs.ca/COVID).

The global COVID-19 pandemic is changing daily. We will update this information as things change.

*Scroll the document, or click the heading to jump to a section.*

1. [Cancer and the COVID-19 Vaccine](#)
2. [Cancer Care Preparation for an Outbreak](#)
3. [Cancer Care During an Outbreak](#)
4. [Symptoms](#)
5. [Appointments](#)
6. [Testing for COVID-19](#)
7. [Family Support and Visitation](#)
8. [Other Common Questions](#)

## 1. Cancer and the COVID-19 Vaccine

Vaccines are a critical way to limit the spread of COVID-19. They are safe and effective. Immunization protects your health, as well as the health of your loved ones and the community.

### How do I know if it is safe for me to get the vaccine while in cancer treatment?

- **If you are newly diagnosed or in active treatment**, discuss the COVID-19 vaccine with your oncologist. Your oncologist will help you understand the appropriate timing and the need to continue to follow public health guidelines. Your oncologist should be part of the shared decision-making process.
- **If you have completed your treatment**, please speak with your oncologist or family doctor.

It may be important for your overall health to get the vaccine when it's available, but it's important to speak to your oncologist or nurse practitioner.

Currently, there is not enough evidence on how long the vaccine will protect you and how well it will reduce the spread of COVID-19. While the vaccines being delivered have shown very high effectiveness in clinical trials, no vaccines provide 100% protection.

After you are vaccinated, it is very important that you continue to wear a mask, practice physical distancing, wash your hands and follow all other public health guidelines.

For more information on the vaccine visit the [Alberta Health Services COVID-19 vaccine page](#) or the [MyHealth Alberta COVID-19 vaccine page](#).

## 2. Cancer Care Preparation for an Outbreak

### **Is Cancer Care Alberta prepared if a COVID-19 outbreak happens at one of the cancer centres?**

Health care facilities around the province are taking action every day to keep staff and patients safe from COVID-19. Even with many precautions, some outbreaks have happened in hospitals.

Cancer Care Alberta has created a plan to guide us if many staff become sick or need to isolate. Creating this plan doesn't mean we will need to use it, but we want to make sure we're prepared.

### **Our priority is to continue offering Albertans the same level of service we always have.**

If an outbreak happens in a cancer centre we may need to make some changes. We have a plan to help guide our decisions and actions if this happens. This plan was created by the many specialists who provide care in our centres. The plan is based on the best evidence available to us.

You can review [a summary of the plan](#) on the AHS webpages.

### **If there is a COVID-19 outbreak, how will I know if my cancer treatment is affected?**

We are doing everything we can to prevent this. If we do have an outbreak in one of our cancer centres, you could hear about it in the news or from your cancer care team. An outbreak does not mean services will change. If your treatment is affected your cancer care team will talk with you about what change is recommended and why.



### 3. Cancer Care during an Outbreak

If there is an active outbreak of COVID-19 at one of our centres, Cancer Care Alberta staff will continue to offer support and treatment to cancer patients and families. Care teams will communicate with you if there is an impact on your care.

#### How could staff shortages affect my care?

Our priority is to continue offering Albertans the same level of service we always have.

We might not be able to provide all of the services and care we normally do if many staff are sick and cannot come to work. This may or may not affect your care. Many people will continue to get treatment. Some people may have their treatment delayed, stopped, or receive treatment differently.

**If the cancer care team recommends a change to your plan, they will talk with you about it. You will not get a call if your plan is staying the same.**

#### If many staff get sick, why can't Cancer Care Alberta just get more staff to provide care?

It is not easy to get new cancer care staff during an outbreak because:

- Oncology is a specialized field and new staff need training to care for you safely.
- Many areas of the health care system may also be dealing with staff shortages due to sickness.

#### How will decisions be made about my care?

When considering the need for changes to your care, the cancer care team will look at many different things:

- The type of treatment you are having — systemic treatment, radiation treatment, surgery, psychosocial or rehabilitation oncology services
- The goals of your treatment — is it to cure or control the cancer, is it to help manage symptoms, is it to help you with daily necessities
- Your personal situation — what is your diagnosis, how quickly is the cancer changing, and how is the treatment expected to affect your cancer

Cancer care teams will review your care plan. **If the cancer care team recommends a change to your plan, they will talk with you about it. You will not get a call if your plan is staying the same.**

Only the cancer care team offering that treatment can talk to you about your situation and what is happening with your care.

### **What are the possible changes to treatment?**

Most people who are in treatment will continue to get the same care they have been getting. Some people will get their care differently. Clinic visits with your cancer care team may be virtual (over the phone or computer). Treatments may be at a different cancer centre. A small number of people might have to wait longer to start treatment and a very small number of people may stop treatment during the outbreak. If there are changes to your treatment plan, the care team will explain them to you.

Managing treatment and care during a pandemic is based on our Treatment Prioritization Plan that was created by specialists who provide care in our centres. **The plan is based on the best evidence available.**

### **What if I don't agree with the decision that is made about my care?**

Whenever possible, we encourage you to speak with your cancer care team first. They know you best. Discussing your concerns with them may help you understand the decision that's been made.

You can also ask to talk with the manager or supervisor for help. If you still have concerns, you can contact the [Patient Relations Department](#) at 1-855-550-2555.

### **What if my treatment is delayed and I am concerned that my cancer is getting worse?**

Talk with your family doctor or call the cancer centre and speak to someone on your cancer care team.

### **If my treatment is delayed, how will I know when it is going to begin again?**

You will get a call or a letter about restarting treatment. Care teams will regularly review the charts of patients whose treatment is changed. When our staff numbers start to return to normal, patients will be contacted for an appointment if they have not been already.

If you still haven't heard from your care team within 4 weeks of being told your treatment is changed or delayed, please contact the cancer centre or your family doctor.



## 4. Symptoms

### Chemotherapy

#### **I am on chemotherapy and I have a fever. What should I do?**

If you have a temperature of:

- 38.3°C (100.9°F) or higher at any time **or**
- 38.0°C (100.4°F) to 38.2°C (100.8°F) for at least 1 hour

Follow the directions your cancer centre gave you.

### Immunotherapy

#### **I am on immunotherapy and have developed a cough, shortness of breath or fever. What should I do?**

If you have:

- a fever of 38.9°C (102°F ) or higher that lasts longer than 24 hours
- a cough **or**
- difficulty breathing

Follow the directions your cancer centre gave you.

### Radiation Treatment

#### **I am on radiation treatment and have a cough related to treatment. What should I do?**

If you are having treatment to the chest or lungs, a cough can be a normal side effect from treatment. Answer the screening questions honestly. Tell the person doing your screening you have a cough and are having radiation treatment to the lungs. They may call someone else on the cancer care team to decide on next steps.

- If your cough has not changed and you have no new symptoms you will go to the radiation department for your scheduled treatment. Staff at the screening desk may consult with someone from the treatment area before sending you to your appointment.
- If your cough has changed and is different than before, you should report it as a new symptom to the staff at the screening desk. The cancer care team will talk with you about next steps.

### Anxiety and Distress

**There are resources available to help with anxiety and distress:**

- [Getting Help during COVID-19](#)
- [Cancer Care Alberta Supportive Care and Living Well resources](#)
- [AHS COVID 19 Help in Tough Times](#)

## 5. Appointments

### Clinic Visits (Follow-up and Treatment)

To lower the chances of COVID-19 for our patients and staff and limit the number of people at the cancer centres, your cancer care team is reviewing your care before your appointment and you may be offered a telephone follow-up appointment.

#### **I am worried about getting COVID-19. Do I have to come in for my follow-up appointment?**

Depending on the reason for your appointment, your cancer care team may offer you a "virtual" visit (over the phone or computer). We will only offer this as an option if it is safe to do so. Cancer care staff may ask you what technology (phone or computer) you have access to and are comfortable using. Please let them know if you have any concerns. Tips on making the most of your "virtual" visit are found [here](#).

### Treatment Appointments (Radiation and Systemic)

#### **Should I still go to my cancer treatment appointment?**

Treatment appointments are still scheduled. Please plan to come. If you do not feel well, call the cancer centre first using the contact number you were given.

#### **What happens if my treatment appointment needs to be cancelled because I am sick?**

If you have COVID-19 or other symptoms that keep you from going to your treatment appointment, a member of your care team will talk to you about the next steps.

## 6. Screening for COVID-19 at the Cancer Centres

You may receive a screening phone call before your appointment at the cancer centre.

**Please note:** It is very important that you answer all screening questions as honestly and fully as possible. You will still get care you need.

Answering honestly helps us:

- Provide you with the best possible care for your cancer and any symptoms you have
- Keep our cancer care teams as healthy as possible so they can continue to provide care
- Help limit the spread of COVID-19

## Arriving at a cancer centre

### What can I expect when I come to the cancer centre?

- Use the hand sanitizer immediately upon entering the building.
- We will ask you screening questions. This will help us limit people's exposure to COVID-19 within our centres and keep patients and staff as safe as possible. Answering fully allows us to provide you with the most appropriate cancer care.
- There may be line-ups. Please come **5-10 minutes earlier** than you normally do. This will give you time for the screening questions and help you get to your appointment on time.
- Please respect the need to stay 2 meters or 6 feet away from others at screening desks, reception desks and in waiting areas.
- You will be given a medical mask and must wear it until you leave the cancer centre.

### What will happen if I have symptoms when I arrive at the cancer centre?

- If you have symptoms, **call your cancer centre before you come** so they can assess you by phone first.
- Every time you come to the cancer centre a staff member will assess you. If you have symptoms that could be from COVID-19 or other COVID-19 related risks, the person who assesses you will contact a cancer care provider to come and make a safe plan with you.

## 7. Testing for COVID-19

### COVID-19 testing and cancer centres

#### What do I do now that I have my COVID-19 test result?

##### My result is:

**Positive for COVID-19** – Public Health will contact you with your positive result and give you more information about what to do next.

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It is very important that you call your oncologist/cancer care team right away and let them know you are positive for COVID-19.  
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**Negative for COVID-19** – Continue to follow Public Health recommendations to keep yourself healthy and safe.

## Family Support and Visitation

### Is a designated support person allowed at the cancer centre?

To protect cancer patients and staff, we follow the direction of Alberta Health and Alberta Health Services [on family support and visitation](#). Local restrictions on support persons will depend on what is happening with COVID-19 in the local community and care centre.

Any support person that is able to enter the cancer centre will be screened at the entrance and given a mask to wear until they leave.

Find more information about family support and visitation, your options and responsibilities [here](#).

### When We Have to Limit Support Persons

We understand how difficult it is when we have to limit support persons. We encourage you to use technology, like FaceTime and phone calls, to stay in touch with your loved ones.

You may want to consider using the [My Care Conversations](#) app available for download for free in the App Store or Google Play. With this app, you can securely audio record conversations with your cancer care team.

You can find more information on family support and visitation requirements [here](#).

## 8. Other Common Questions

### Cancer and COVID-19

#### As a cancer patient, am I more likely to get COVID-19?

At this point, we cannot be sure if cancer patients are more likely to get sick with COVID-19. New evidence and understanding does show that cancer patients and those on treatment may experience COVID-19 more severely. To help keep yourself safe, follow the COVID-19 [precautions](#).

#### Am I at higher risk if I am a cancer patient who smokes?

With COVID-19 affecting the lungs, it seems likely that cancer patients who smoke are even more vulnerable to severe COVID-19 symptoms. We recommend you stop smoking. For help with quitting smoking, visit [AlbertaQuits.ca](#). To help keep yourself safe, follow the COVID-19 [precautions](#).





## Bloodwork

### **My lab that I normally go to for bloodwork is closed. Where do I go?**

Labs are working hard to make sure they have enough staff and resources to meet the public's needs safely. If your local lab is closed, check for more information at [DynaLife Medical Labs](#) or [Alberta Precision Labs](#).

### **I'm immunocompromised. Is it safe for me to get my bloodwork/MRI/CT/PET?**

These tests are important. Every Alberta Health Services site is doing what they can to [keep staff and patients safe](#). If you still have concerns, talk to your cancer care team about how changing these appointments can impact your care.

## Cancer Medications

### **If I need cancer medications for home, what do I do?**

Call the cancer pharmacy like you normally do. We ask that you call for your refill medication **2 weeks in advance** so there is time to mail your prescription to you. You do not need to come and pick up your medication. If you have a telephone or virtual appointment, your medication will be couriered to you.

## Isolation and Exposure

### **I live with someone who is self-isolating but has no symptoms. Do I have to self-isolate as well?**

Follow these [self-isolation](#) guidelines. An additional explanation is available [here](#) for parents of school children. Please note that if a child in school or another member of your household tests positive for COVID-19, they **must** self-isolate. If that impacts a cancer appointment, please contact your cancer care team.

### **I think I've been exposed to COVID-19. What should I do?**

Alberta Health Services is calling people who are considered a close contact of someone with a confirmed case of COVID-19.

- Find out more about being a close contact [here](#).
- If your child is attending school or daycare and your concern is related to their symptoms or a case at their school or daycare, get more information [here](#).

If you still have concerns or need more information call 811 or your family doctor for advice.

If you have symptoms of COVID-19 follow [these directions](#).

## Classes, Events and Patient Information Pamphlets

### Are there still classes, support groups and events?

Yes. We are starting to offer online classes and support groups. Find out what is available and how to register by asking your cancer care team or by going to [Classes and Events](#).

### Are there print copies of cancer patient information available?

Pamphlet racks are not available at this time due to the public health requirements for physical distancing. There are digital versions of all Cancer Care Alberta's patient information at [Information for Patients and Families](#).

If you need print copies for any reason, please ask your cancer care team.

