

Questions & Answers

Long-Term Care and Seniors' Assisted Living Facilities – Easing Visitor Restrictions

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April 2021 easing of restrictions:

1. What are the key changes to the social visitor policy for long-term care (LTC) and seniors' assisted living (AL) facilities?

- Family/social visits are no longer limited to **one** designated family member or friend. **Additional** family members and friends are allowed with a **maximum of two visitors** (plus one child) at the same time if the visit is indoors.
- Residents may have more social visitors outdoors, in an appropriate location, and in alignment with current provincial health officer guidelines. Infection prevention and control measures (e.g., visitors must be screened for signs and symptoms of illness prior to every visit, practice hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette – cough or sneeze into elbows/sleeves, dispose used tissues properly – and wear medical masks) must be followed.
- There are no longer restrictions on the location, frequency, or duration of visits, and visits can now take place in residents' rooms.

- Physical touch between residents and their visitors is now allowed with infection prevention and control measures in place.
- Every resident is entitled to regular, routine, frequent opportunities for social visitation, allowing for a minimum of 60 minutes if desired.

2. What other restrictions are being lifted?

- Residents will be supported to leave the facility for appropriate outings and family visits (not just essential outings). Residents will not be required to isolate when they return from an outing.
- Residents will also no longer be required to isolate for 14 days upon admission to a LTC or seniors' AL facility.
- Physical distance restrictions between residents within the facility have been revised so residents can participate in shared dining and small group social or recreational activities within a facility unit or floor.

3. What other requirements remain in effect for visitors and residents in LTC and seniors' AL facilities?

- Residents and visitors are still expected to practice proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette. Visitors are still required to wear a medical mask when visiting.
- Social visits must still be **scheduled in advance** and tracked for contact tracing.
- Visitors will still be **screened for signs and symptoms of illness, including COVID-19, before their visits.**
- Visitation will be suspended if there is an active COVID-19 outbreak at the facility.

4. When did these changes take effect?

- We recognize that health authorities, operators and staff need some time to prepare for and communicate the changes to residents, their families and friends.

- This is why the easing of restrictions was announced in advance, providing LTC and seniors' AL operators one week to prepare, plan and communicate the changes to residents and families.
- The changes took effect on April 1, 2021.
- Policies will continue to be reviewed and evaluated as part of the ongoing response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic in BC.

5. Why are you making these changes now?

- Recognizing that LTC and seniors' AL facilities are home to some of our most vulnerable citizens who are at risk of serious complications from COVID-19, the Province implemented restrictions to reduce the risk of transmission for residents and staff during the earlier phases of the pandemic.
- While the restrictions were necessary to keep residents and staff safe, we know they have been challenging for many residents and their families.
- The ministry and the provincial health officer review COVID-19 guidelines and policies regularly and based on successful immunization efforts for residents and staff in all facilities, combined with visitor screening and infection and prevention control measures, we are easing some of the restrictions for residents and families.
- For example, as of February 15, 2021, many staff, residents, and essential visitors in all LTC and seniors' AL settings have been vaccinated with their first dose and several with their second dose.
- More than 90% of LTC and seniors' AL facility residents provincewide have received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine. Immunization for the remaining, small number of residents who have not received their first dose and wish to do so is being prioritized.
- The vaccine has proven to be highly effective and these changes are being implemented in all LTC and seniors' AL facilities in B.C. now that the majority of residents have received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine for protection.

6. Why have you removed the requirement for a resident to isolate for 14 days upon admission to a LTC or seniors' AL facility?

- The requirement for residents to isolate for 14 days upon admission was put in place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to keep residents and staff safe, but we know this has been challenging for many residents and their families.
- With the majority of LTC and seniors' AL facility residents provincewide having received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, the risk of transmission is low.
- As well, all individuals are offered the opportunity for immunization while awaiting placement in a LTC or seniors' AL facility, meaning that many will already be vaccinated upon their arrival at the facility.

7. You have lifted the 14-day isolation requirement for new admissions. Are you also ramping up vaccination for these individuals?

- Yes. All individuals being assessed or awaiting placement in a LTC or seniors' AL facility are offered the opportunity for immunization.

8. Will residents being admitted to LTC or seniors' AL require a COVID test?

- No, asymptomatic testing has shown very little benefit. All individuals being assessed or awaiting placement in a LTC or seniors' AL facility will be offered the opportunity for immunization.

9. What if a resident isn't immunized yet, do the changes still apply to them?

- Yes. The changes apply to all residents in LTC and seniors' AL, whether they have been immunized for COVID-19 or not.
- While we strongly encourage immunization, it is not mandatory for all residents.
- For example, we know that some residents will be unable to be immunized for medical reasons.
- That is why we have been working to provide immunization opportunities to as many LTC and seniors' AL residents and staff as possible to help reduce the risk of transmission in the facilities.

Social visiting:

10. The visitor policy states there is no restriction on location, frequency, and duration of visits, but is there a set number of visits a resident can have in a single day?

- Every resident is entitled to regular, routine, frequent opportunities for social visitation, allowing for a minimum of 60 minutes if desired.
- Scheduling should take into consideration the resident's tolerance of the total number of social visitors and duration of visit. Visitation scheduling should be discussed in collaboration with the resident or their substitute decision maker.
- Visits must still be scheduled in advance and tracked for contract tracing.
- Any limits on the frequency or duration of visits should only be to meet WorkSafe BC guidelines and facility visitation safety plans.

11. If there is an outbreak will social visitation be suspended?

- Yes, social visitation will be suspended when there is an active outbreak as defined in the [COVID-19 Provincial Outbreak Management Protocol](#).

12. Is there a requirement for operators for enhanced cleaning of resident rooms after each visit?

- No. Unless a visit is in a common area, there is no expectation of enhanced cleaning after a social visit in a resident's room.

13. Are operators expected to monitor social visits?

- No. Facility staff are not required to monitor social visits – in resident rooms or in other areas of the facility.

14. With these changes there is a potential for a significant increase in social visitors. Are you putting any supports in place to support operators and staff?

- As announced last summer, the Province is providing \$122.4 million for operators to hire additional staff to support safe visitation and to date, 1,480 individuals have been hired.

- We hope that allowing visits to now occur in multiple locations, including residents' rooms will help reduce the need to move residents to and from visiting areas. And, while strict infection prevention and control protocols are still in place, visitation in resident rooms should reduce the need for additional enhanced cleaning required between visits.
- In addition, social visitation will still need to be scheduled in advance, which will also help operators and staff to spread out visits where possible to help manage the flow of visitors.

15. Are residents and family members/ friends required to wear medical masks for social visits?

- Yes. Visitors are still expected to wear a medical mask when visiting their family member or friend in the facility. They should also practice hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and maintain physical distance from other residents, visitors, and staff while they are on-site.

16. With respect to child social visitors, are they required to wear medical masks? Medical masks are too large for some children. Can children wear their own masks? What if they are under the age of two?

- Children over the age of two should be encouraged to wear a mask if they can.
- The risk of COVID-19 spread to health care workers from young children is low in a health care setting where we have many other preventative measures in place.
- There is no benefit to having a child wear an adult-sized mask which is too large; instead, the child should wear a pediatric-sized mask, even if it is not medical grade. Children wearing their own masks from home is better than no mask at all.
- Pediatric masks are available for order from Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA).

17. Do care homes need to ensure that the social visitors (up to two adults and one child) are from the same household? Under the current public health restrictions, only people from the same household are allowed to gather indoors.

- As much as possible, when two adults are visiting at the same time, staff should encourage them to be from the same household.
- Having said that, there will be circumstances where people from different households may need to visit at the same time (e.g., daughter supporting elderly spouse to visit) and there is no expectation that care homes enforce the “same household” requirement for visitors.
- This approach is similar to the public guidance for other settings such as restaurants, where people from the same household can dine together under the current public health guidance, but restaurants are not expected to check ID to enforce this.

18. Are inter-facility and intra-facility social visits be permitted? Can a resident visit with a friend or family member who lives in a different unit or facility?

- Residents can visit friends and family members who live in other units or facilities, but must follow all guidelines for social visits as any other social visitor would (please see [Ministry of Health - Overview of Visitors in Long-Term Care and Seniors' Assisted Living](#)).

Essential visits:

19. Have you also made changes to the essential visitor policy?

- The essential visitor policy for LTC and seniors’ AL remains in place with no changes.
- The essential visitor guidelines include:
 - Visits for compassionate care, including critical illness, palliative care, hospice care, end of life and medical assistance in dying.
 - Visits paramount to the patient/client’s physical care and mental well-being, including:
 - Assistance with feeding mobility or personal care;
 - Communication assistance and supported decision-making for people with disabilities; and,

- Existing registered volunteers providing services as described.
- Essential visits are limited to one visitor at a time. For palliative and end-of-life care, more than one visitor may be allowed at a time.

20.If an individual has questions or concerns about decisions made regarding their visitor status. What is the process?

- Visitors can request an immediate review of any decisions made related to their visitor status and will be able to speak with an administrator or administrator on call.
- Further reviews of decisions are done through, or facilitated by, the health authority Patient Care Quality Office.
- If a visitor remains unsatisfied, a formal appeal for review can be submitted to the PHO.
- For more information on the review process, please see the Ministry of Health's overview of visitors in long-term care and seniors' assisted living guidance, available online [here](#).

Immunization and testing:

21.Will you be immunizing social visitors?

- At this time the focus is on immunizing residents, staff, and essential visitors, which we know adds a layer of protection for those in the facility, especially residents who cannot be immunized for medical reasons.
- And to further protect residents, staff and visitors, strict infection prevention and control precautions remain in place in LTC and seniors' AL facilities. Social visitors are required to book their visits in advance, be screened before entry, wear a medical mask, practice hand hygiene, cough/sneeze into their elbows and maintain their physical distance from other visitors and staff.
- The Province is also in Phase 4 of BC's COVID-19 Immunization Plan, which means that more members of the community, especially high-risk populations, have received at least one dose of the vaccine or will soon.

22. Have you considered using POC rapid testing to screen social visitors who have not been vaccinated?

- The Province is using point-of-care (POC) testing as another tool to support public health in contact tracing and outbreak response efforts in rural and remote communities, as well as some worksites and congregate living settings where there is a high risk for outbreaks with vulnerable populations, including LTC facilities.
- In accordance with the provincial strategy and public health guidance, POC test kits can be used for screening in LTC, AL and IL settings. The focus of the screening is intended to be asymptomatic health-care workers and residents.
- To access test kits from PHSA as part of the provincial rapid POC program, operators can contact RapidPOCTeam@phsa.ca
- We understand that some HAs and MHOs are supporting POC screening of visitors and several operators have noted they plan to screen visitors in their applications to the provincial POC screening program.
- It is important to note that POC tests do not replace any of the public health orders, protective measures, or COVID-19 safety plans. The requirements for visitors (social visits) remain in effect: visitors will need to schedule their visits in advance, be screened before entry and follow infection control and prevention practices (hand hygiene, maintain physical distance from other visitors and staff while on-site, wearing medical masks and cough/sneeze into their elbows).
- Also, if there is an active outbreak, social visits will be temporarily suspended. All of these measures will help to reduce the risk of transmission and keep residents, staff, health-care workers, and visitors safe.

23. Immunization rates among staff are lower than residents. Should immunization for staff be mandatory?

- While immunizing as many people as possible is the goal, immunization is not mandatory for staff or residents.
- We recognize that there are a number of reasons why an individual may choose not to be immunized, including due to medical conditions.

- Vaccine effectiveness and protection is very high for residents, even after one dose.
- And, as more residents receive a second dose an additional level of protection will be added.
- We continue to offer immunization opportunities to staff to encourage uptake.
- We will also continue to provide information to support staff who may be hesitant about being immunized.

24. As more people in the community are immunized will you look at further easing of the restrictions?

- The Province had implemented restrictions at LTC and seniors' AL facilities to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission for residents and staff during the earlier phases of the pandemic.
- That said, we know how important visits are to the health and wellbeing of residents, their families and friends, which is why we are easing some of the restrictions based on the current immunization situation at LTC and seniors' AL facilities.
- We regularly re-evaluate the restrictions that are still in place. We will revisit this easing of restrictions in three months and may adjust based on the progress of immunization and the COVID-19 situation in the community.

Outings:

25. If a resident visits a private residence/household, does that violate provincial COVID-19 restrictions?

- No, when interpreting general public health guidance, residents of LTC and seniors' AL are considered as people who live on their own. This is in consideration of the negative impact on social connections experienced by residents of LTC and seniors' AL throughout the pandemic.
- According to the [Order of the Provincial Health Officer: Gatherings and Events](#) (March 24, 2021), a person who lives on their own may be present for social purposes at one private residence or vacation accommodation with more than

one occupant if the person regularly interacts with the occupants of the private residence or vacation accommodation.

26. Do operators need to supply personal protective equipment for residents to wear when they are leaving the facility on an outing?

- Yes, residents are encouraged to follow general public health guidelines when they have outings or social visits outside the facility. The expectation is that operators will provide residents with a medical mask to wear when they are leaving the facility on an outing.

27. Are residents and family members/friends required to wear medical masks for outings?

- For residents who have outings or family visits outside of the facility, we encourage them to follow the public health guidelines for everyone else in the community.
- These include frequent hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, maintaining physical distance from people where possible and wearing a mask in indoor public settings or where physical distance cannot be maintained. [Please see the *Emergency Program Act \(EPA\) Mask Mandate Order* for further information.](#)

28. Is there a limit to the number of outings a resident can have or the length of their outings?

- No. Residents may leave the facility for appropriate outings and family visits, and there is no requirement for residents to isolate when they return from an outing.
- While there is no restriction on the length of outings, residents should keep in mind that settings outside of their facility may not have as rigorous infection prevention and control practices as their facilities and the risk of transmission for COVID-19 and other illnesses are likely higher.
- As a result, when residents are outside of the facilities, they should follow general infection prevention best practices such as maintaining physical distance from other people where possible, frequent hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and wearing a mask when they are in indoor public settings or are unable to maintain a physical distance from others.

29. What is considered an appropriate outing?

- While residents may leave for social outings outside of facilities, it is important for residents, their families, and friends to keep in mind that there are still provincial COVID-19 restrictions for the general public that also apply to them.
- For instance, the provincial health officer order on gatherings and events limits the number of people who can attend outdoor and indoor social gathering. Large groups of people outside a person's core bubble are not allowed. This includes large family celebrations or events both indoors and outdoors.
- For more information on current provincial restrictions and PHO orders, visit: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/info/restrictions>

30. Are residents able to go on overnight visits with family or friends?

- Yes, residents are able to go on overnight visits, if they choose, and there is no requirement for residents to isolate when they return from an outing.

31. Are residents expected to wear a mask in the facility when they return from an outing?

- No, residents are not expected to wear a mask inside of the facility.

Dining and group recreational activities:

32. Can residents go on bus outings now?

- Yes, bus outings are allowed.
- Groups on bus outings should be kept small, and general infection prevention and control practices should be followed as on any other outing.

33. Are residents required to wear medical masks for shared dining and small group social or recreational activities?

- Under the provincial policy, only health-care workers, staff and visitors are required to wear a medical mask on-site.
- In general, residents without suspected or confirmed COVID-19 illness are not required to wear a medical mask when they move around in the facility.

- Only residents with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 illness are required to wear medical masks (if tolerated) or use tissues to cover their mouth and nose. In these situations, these residents are required to isolate and stay in their rooms or bed space as much as possible to minimize the risk of transmission to other residents and staff.

34. What other measures will be required to be put in place by facilities to support shared dining and group recreational activities.

- Residents can now attend small group social and recreational activities for residents within a facility unit or floor without having to maintain physical distance. They can also go back to eating at the same time and sitting at tables with other residents.
- All of these will help to reduce the workload for staff (for example, staggering mealtimes and rearranging the room or furniture) so we do not expect health authorities and facilities will need to have additional measures or support to return to previous routines.

Other questions:

35. Are volunteers now allowed widely back into LTC and seniors' AL facilities?

- Currently, a volunteer can be designated as an essential visitor under the ministry policy for essential visitation and this will remain in place.
- As we continue to review and evaluate visitor restrictions, the introduction of non-essential volunteers will be considered.

36. Do these changes allow sites to start responsible in-person tours of a LTC or AL facility to show potential new residents, assuming appropriate safety measures are in place?

- This updated visitation guidance does not provide for the resumption of tours of the facility.
- As we continue to review and evaluate visitor restrictions, the introduction of in-person tours will be considered.

37. Under the current order restricting non-essential travel, are essential and social visits considered essential travel?

- Yes, both essential and social visits are considered essential travel according to the [Emergency Program Act – Travel Restrictions](#) (April 30, 2021).
- Essential and social visits may continue with visitors from within or outside the health region.