

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) provides advice to the profession to support physicians in implementing the CPSA Standards of Practice. This advice does not define a standard of practice, nor should it be interpreted as legal advice.

Advice to the Profession documents are dynamic and may be edited or updated for clarity at any time. Please refer back to these articles regularly to ensure you are aware of the most recent advice. Major changes will be communicated to our members; however, minor edits may only be noted within the documents.

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Note: This statement is applicable for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Patients who refuse to wear a mask

Blanket policies that exclude patients from receiving in-person care for failing to wear a mask cannot be instituted, as each patient encounter is unique. Physicians have a responsibility to fully explain why a mask is required and to determine whether or not other options are possible under the clinical circumstances (e.g., having the patient wait outside, booking them as the first or last appointment of the day to limit contact with staff). Understanding the patient’s perspective, answering questions and problem-solving together will enable the patient to appropriately navigate their own care and use of a face

mask during the pandemic.

MASK USE GUIDANCE

Based on [Health Canada guidelines](#), the only Albertans who are exempt from wearing masks are:

- people who suffer from illnesses or disabilities that make it difficult to put on or take off a mask;
- people who have difficulty breathing; or
- children under the age of two.

That said, patients are **not** required to provide documentation of their exemption, which is why it's important to have conversations with your patients to understand their situations. Begin by asking any patients who express mask-use concerns if they fall into one of the three exempted categories noted above.

- If patients **do qualify** for an exemption, they may receive care without a mask.
- If patients **do not qualify** for an exemption, you have the right to refuse care based on the health risk to clinic staff, as long as the patient is not in need of urgent/emergent care.
 - Religious grounds or infringement of civil liberties are **not** considered valid exemptions.

The decision to refuse care cannot be delegated: this judgment should be made by the most responsible physician and must be balanced with ensuring the safety of the patient and the urgency of their care needs with the needs of the other patients and staff (see clause 6.4 in AHS's directive "[Use of Masks during COVID-19](#)").

PROACTIVE APPROACH

Taking a proactive approach to addressing mask use with your patients may help you avoid confrontations. Some steps to take might include:

- Screening patients when booking their appointments:

- Ask if they qualify for an exemption and, if not, clearly state the clinic policy on mandatory mask use.
- In medical clinics that do not require appointments, screening at the clinic entrance is recommended.
- Using office signage at the clinic entrance and reception desk to reinforce clinic mask use policy.
- Contacting local police if verbally or physically abusive situations arise. Abuse toward physicians, their clinic teams or other patients is never acceptable.

Alberta Health Services also has a [comprehensive guide](#) on mask use.

Requests for sick notes or mask exemption letters

It is inappropriate for patients to request a note when they have missed work due to a self-limited short-term illness (e.g., up to 72 hours); the Canadian Medical Association has stated the same for some time and has repeated its stance [during the pandemic](#).

Unless the patient falls into one of the [identified categories at risk for wearing a mask](#)—(children under two years of age, people who are unable to remove masks without assistance or those with trouble breathing), they would not be exempt from wearing a mask.

You will likely know those patients who fall into these very specific circumstances where an individual patient meets the narrow criteria for the mask exclusion, and there will not be many of those individuals. If, in your clinical judgement, you determine it is medically necessary for the patient to be exempt from wearing a mask, you may provide them with an exemption letter. However, if you determine it is **not** medically necessary for the patient to be exempt, you are **not obligated** to provide them with such a note. Ensure your rationale for either decision is clearly and thoroughly documented in the patient's record.

[The CMPA](#) remains available for medico-legal guidance specific to each patient.

To view our Patient FAQs on COVID-19 Medical Care or to share with your patients, please [visit our website](#).

Patients who disobey public health orders

You are not required to report patients who disobey public health orders; however, you have the option of reporting patients who disobey public health orders to [Alberta Health Services Environmental Public Health](#).

Patients who fail to report symptoms or COVID contact

Unfortunately, some patients are not forthcoming when asked screening questions and fail to disclose when they are experiencing flu-like symptoms, when they have a household member who is isolating or COVID positive or are attending medical clinics to obtain COVID test results instead of following isolation rules.

An automatic discharge or similar blanket policy is inappropriate, as you should have a conversation with the patient to explain the importance of being honest and following public health orders. However, a patient deliberately misleading the physician/clinic staff may be grounds for their dismissal, as they are putting others in danger.

It is important to document the incident, including the conversation with the patient, in the patient's record. If you decide to discharge the patient, follow the [Terminating the Physician-Patient Relationship](#) standard of practice.

Managing disruptive, threatening or abusive patients

If a patient becomes abusive to you, your staff or other patients, they may be asked to leave the premises. Physicians are not expected to tolerate this type of behaviour and have the right to immediately discharge patients who act in this manner from their practice under the [Terminating the Physician-Patient Relationship](#) standard of practice.

If a patient poses a safety risk to you, your staff or other patients, contact your local police department for assistance.

Resources

CPSA team members are available to speak with physicians who have questions or concerns. Please contact Chantelle Dick, Standards of Practice Advisor, at 780-717-2573 or chantelle.dick@cpsa.ab.ca.

- Alberta Health (2020): [COVID-19 info for Albertans](#)
- Alberta Health Services (2020): [Information for Community Physicians \(COVID-19\)](#)
- Alberta Medical Association (2020): [Resource Centre for Physicians \(COVID-19\)](#)
- CPSA (2020): [Resources for Physicians During COVID-19](#)
- Government of Alberta (2020): [Alberta Biz Connect](#)
- Government of Canada (2020): [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\): For health professionals](#)
- Government of Canada (2020): [Risk-informed decision-making guidelines for workplaces and businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

RELATED STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

- [Responsibility for a Medical Practice](#)
- [Terminating the Physician-Patient Relationship](#)

COMPANION RESOURCES

- Advice to the Profession documents:
 - [COVID-19: Defining “Urgent”](#)
 - [COVID-19: Difficult Practice Decisions](#)
 - [COVID-19: Reopening Practice](#)
 - [COVID-19: Virtual Care](#)
- [Patient FAQs: COVID-19: Medical Care](#)