



BALANCING DEMANDS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR FAMILY PHYSICIANS

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Introduction

With our health system focused on increasing COVID-19 vaccination rates, caring for sick patients, maintaining ongoing patient care, catching up on the backlog – and more – family physicians are facing many competing priorities.

We are mindful of our collective exhaustion, and the need to [care for ourselves and each other](#).

Here are some considerations for balancing the multiple demands right now.





Care Focus

Given the significant backlog in our own practices, higher acuity among our patients and with the approaching flu season, the focus should be on helping our patients stay well **in the community and out of hospital**.

- ▶ Maintain our essential role in comprehensive patient care, and **do not delay in-person care when needed**.
- ▶ Provide care for **acute, emergent, and new conditions** – managing acute issues in the community wherever possible and appropriate to do so.
- ▶ According to your practice model and capacity, make available after-hours care for your patients.
- ▶ Maintain [high-impact prevention strategies](#), such as cancer screening and immunization – prioritizing those at higher risk.
- ▶ **Support COVID-19 vaccination efforts** – including education, outreach to those unvaccinated, and offer vaccination depending on capacity and access to vaccines from your PHU.
- ▶ *As you are able given the needs above*, consider offering testing/assessment in the community or in-office.



Balancing In-Person and Virtual Care During COVID-19

- ▶ **Consider patient needs and preference** along with the presenting condition.
 - Even if it is appropriate to provide care virtually, your patient’s best interests may be served by providing care in person.
 - Patient age, language and communication barriers may all mean in-person care is preferable.
- ▶ See patients with **new or worsening symptoms** requiring in-person assessment, including those with COVID-19 symptoms if equipped to do so.
 - The OCFP’s [Considerations for Balancing In-Person and Virtual Care](#), and this [CMAJ blog](#) share examples of in-person care.
- ▶ Conduct physical **examinations where normally required** before making referrals or ordering tests.
- ▶ Provide preventive care, especially where we know the risk of delayed care to be high:
 - **Cancer screening:** prioritized by degree  of overdue and/or patient’s level of risk. Here is CCO’s guidance on prioritization: [Provider tip sheet](#) | [Provider webpage](#).
 - **Immunizations and well-child visits.** 
- ▶ Offer **COVID-19 vaccination**, where possible (see next section).

Moving to a “patient-centered” approach

The Ministry of Health and has released updated [guidance](#) and the CPSO has updated its [FAQs for Physicians](#) on **striking the right balance** between providing in-person and virtual care.


With increasing COVID vaccination rates and adequate access to PPE, the guidance suggests healthcare workers should use a “patient-centered care approach and consider patient preference to determine when to provide in-person care”, adding that in most instances, “in-person care can now be provided safely and appropriately”.

As noted by the CPSO: “Every practice is unique, and the right balance will require judgment on the part of the physician to determine if it is in a patient’s best interest to provide virtual care and to do so only when the potential benefits of providing virtual care outweigh the risks to the patient.”

A reminder that PPE allocations are still available from the provincial pandemic stockpile – this [FAQ](#) has more detail on the PPE support available.



COVID-19 Focus

- ▶ **Inform and educate** your patients about vaccination.  As applicable, raise the COVID-19 vaccine opportunity at every patient interaction. These resources can help answer questions:
 - [Learn the basics of how to address vaccine hesitancy](#) (gated) from the OMA.
 - [Get the evidence to respond to common patient concerns about the vaccine](#) from the Centre for Effective Practice.
 - [Access an in-depth learning module about the COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine hesitancy](#) from the U of T DFCM.

Resources for children and youth ages 12-17, where vaccination rates for this group appear to be slowing:

 - [Children's COVID-19 Vaccine Table](#)
 - [Ontario.ca/COVIDYouthVaccine](#)
- ▶ **Care for your COVID-19 patients in the community:**
 - Support your COVID-19 patients at home. Hamilton Family Medicine has compiled practical [resources](#) for assessing, monitoring and managing COVID-19; FAQ about [long COVID here](#).

Testing/assessment in the community


In many regions, “hubs” with primary care/public health/Ontario Health partnerships will support **testing/assessment** so family practices can continue to focus on ongoing patient care and catching up on backlog. Family practices with capacity and equipped to do so may do in-office assessments of patients with febrile illness/COVID-19 symptoms, as noted in this OCFP [document](#) (page 3), as well as offer in-office testing/assessment for their patients, as noted in ministry [guidance](#) (see ‘Testing’ section).

Use of rapid antigen tests (rapid testing)

Rapid testing is currently not recommended for one-off testing of patients or for use with people who may have COVID-19 symptoms. It may be useful as part of regular ongoing screening with staff, where the repetition offsets the low sensitivity. Individuals with a positive rapid antigen test should be referred for confirmatory PCR testing and isolate until the results of the lab-based test are known.

Those interested can access free rapid tests through this MOH program [here](#).

As your current practice needs permit:

- ▶ **Vaccinate where possible depending on practice capacity and access to vaccines via your local PHU.**  The OCFP continues to advocate for access to vaccines for all family physicians who wish to do so.
 - Reach out to your local [PHU/Primary Care](#) contact if you wish to vaccinate. The OMA has this [decision guide](#) to **assess your in-office capacity**, [an overview guide on the process](#), and a [billing summary](#) (gated documents).
 - For patients wishing to book a vaccine, visit <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/book-vaccine/> or call the Ontario COVID-19 vaccine call centre at 1-833-943-3900.
- ▶ Support regional **COVID-19 testing and assessment** efforts, guided by the priorities of your local PHU.
- ▶ Participate in a [COVID@Home](#) program to help manage patients discharged from hospital with mild to moderate COVID-19 – especially in hard-hit communities.