

COVID-19 and people living with HIV: Taking care of your health

Answers to some frequently asked questions about COVID-19 and HIV, and COVID-19 vaccines and HIV

Are you HIV positive and concerned about the COVID-19 vaccine?
Are you concerned about your health but reluctant or afraid to reach out for health care?

This information sheet provides answers to questions that many people living with HIV may have about their care and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic including:

- accessing healthcare during the pandemic
- COVID-19 vaccines
- dealing with social isolation and mental health.

IMPORTANT NOTE: New information, research and scientific evidence about COVID-19 and the COVID-19 vaccine is coming out every week and sometimes every day. The information provided here is based on what we know as of May 12, 2021. This information is not medical advice.



Is it safe for me to access HIV care during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes. People living with HIV may need treatment and monitoring for other health conditions during the pandemic.

Your health is important! If you feel unwell or have a question or concern about your health, contact your health care provider. It is also important to:

- ▶ keep taking your medication
- ▶ keep your medical appointments with your doctor and other health care providers
- ▶ know how to contact your health care providers in case you need advice.

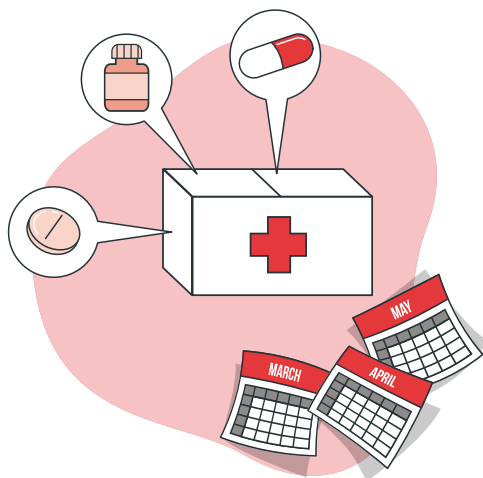


What else do I need to know?

Health care and pharmacy services are open even when public health restrictions like provincial lockdowns (stay at home orders) are in place.

- ▶ You are allowed to go out for health care appointments even when stay at home orders are in place.
- ▶ Keep yourself and others safe by wearing a mask, maintaining social distancing and washing your hands.

Public health safety measures and regulations help to make hospitals, clinics, labs and pharmacies safer for accessing health care.



Your health care providers will minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission by:

- ▶ screening patients for COVID-19 symptoms before seeing them
- ▶ using personal protective equipment
- ▶ practicing good hand hygiene
- ▶ keeping a physical distance, where feasible
- ▶ limiting the number of patients in the waiting room or seen in person
- ▶ requiring patients to wear a face covering (many health care providers can give you a mask if you don't have one)
- ▶ offering virtual (telephone or video) appointments.

Will I be seen virtually or in person?

Health care providers are available virtually, usually by phone or video, to help you.



When you reach out to your health care provider they will:

- ▶ ask about what care you need
- ▶ only offer an in-person appointment if it is best for you.

When booking your appointment tell your health care provider:

- ▶ if there has been any change in your health
- ▶ if you need help using virtual appointment technology.

What if I don't have a doctor?

If you do not have a doctor or you are unable to see your regular doctor call **Telehealth Ontario** ([1-866-797-0000](tel:1-866-797-0000)) for free, confidential advice or information. A Registered Nurse will take your call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Assistance is available in more than 300 languages. Additional information is available at <https://www.ontario.ca/page/get-medical-advice-telehealth-ontario>.

For non-emergency issues, access an **Ontario Virtual Care Clinic** (<https://seethedoctor.ca/en>) 8am to midnight, seven days a week, to connect to an on-call doctor by video or audio, or a walk-in clinic or urgent care centre near you (<https://www.ontario.ca/locations/health>).

If you need to find a location where HIV care can be accessed, call the **Sexual Health Info Line Ontario (SHILO)** at [1-800-668-2437](tel:1-800-668-2437).

If you are having a medical emergency, call 911 or visit the nearest hospital emergency department.



Are people living with HIV at higher risk of COVID-related illness?

People with HIV who are on effective HIV treatment and have an undetectable viral load and strong immune system (CD4 count over 200) are believed to have the same risk for COVID-19 as people who do not have HIV.

The risk might be higher if you have other underlying medical conditions (e.g. diabetes, lung, heart, kidney or liver diseases).

Talk to your doctor to learn more about COVID-19 and your specific health conditions.

You can find additional information at <https://www.catie.ca/en/hiv-and-covid-19>.

What do COVID-19 vaccines mean for me?

The COVID-19 vaccines available to Ontarians are effective in preventing severe illness and death and may reduce transmission

All people living with HIV should consider getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

There have been no safety issues about COVID-19 vaccines in people with HIV.

People who have had a serious or immediate reaction to any of the ingredients in the vaccine (e.g. Polyethylene glycol [PEG]) in the past should consult with their doctor when deciding whether or not to get vaccinated.

Talk to your doctor about the benefits and risks of vaccination if you are not sure.

You can find more information about HIV and COVID-19 vaccines at <https://www.catie.ca/en/covid-19-resources#vaccines>.



When will people living with HIV in Ontario be eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine?

There are two COVID-19 vaccines currently available in Ontario (Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna). Each vaccine requires 2 doses. First doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine are paused at this time and access to second doses is under review.

Ontario has started a three-phased vaccine distribution plan. We are now in Phase 2.

<https://covid-19.ontario.ca/ontarios-covid-19-vaccination-plan>

People with HIV are eligible to be vaccinated in Phase 2 of the vaccine distribution plan

You are eligible as a person with immune deficiency or immunocompromising health condition.

Check the vaccine distribution website to find out when people with HIV can access the vaccine <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/ontarios-covid-19-vaccination-plan#at-risk>.

You and other members of your household may also be eligible depending on age, postal code, job, living arrangements (for example shelters, long-term care home, prison).

The timing of vaccine availability and clinics may differ across and within health units. Check with your local public health unit to find out more:

<https://www.phdapps.health.gov.on.ca/PHULocator/Results.aspx>.

Do I have to talk with my doctor before I get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Generally, you are not required to check with your doctor before getting the COVID-19 vaccine.

However, if you have questions or concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine, it may be best to talk to your health care provider first.

Your health care provider can help you make decisions based on your individual needs and health status.

You should talk to your doctor or health care provider before getting the vaccine if you:

- ▶ are pregnant or breastfeeding
- ▶ have an autoimmune condition (e.g. Multiple Sclerosis, Rheumatoid Arthritis).
- ▶ have any problems with your immune system (e.g. a CD4 count below 200) or take medications that can affect your immune system
- ▶ have had severe allergic reactions to vaccinations before.

You can find more information and updates about COVID-19 vaccine safety and when to talk to your health care provider at <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-19-vaccine-safety#who-should-not-get-the-vaccine>.

Where can I sign up to get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Each public health unit in Ontario has a vaccine plan tailored to their own community's needs.

Your local public health unit can give you up-to-date information about COVID-19 and the COVID-19 vaccine.

Check with your public health unit to find out:

- ▶ where you can get the vaccine
- ▶ how to register for the vaccine
- ▶ if you need to bring any special documents to your vaccine appointment.

Use Ontario's Public Health Unit Locator tool to find a public health unit near you and get the latest updates on COVID-19 at <https://www.phdapps.health.gov.on.ca/PHULocator/Results.aspx>.

You can learn about vaccine availability in your area and schedule a vaccine appointment at <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/book-vaccine>.

Talk to your health care provider if you can't access the online vaccine system or if you are unsure how to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

Do I get to choose which COVID-19 vaccine I will get?

The vaccine offered to you is the right vaccine.

The vaccine you get will depend on vaccine availability.

Some people may be afraid to get vaccinated after hearing stories about significant side-effects. It is important to remember that:

- ▶ the risk of severe side-effects is extremely low
- ▶ the risk of severe health consequences from COVID are much greater than the risks of vaccination for most people
- ▶ the vaccines work! All vaccines approved for use in Canada are effective at preventing severe COVID-19 disease, hospitalization, and death.

You do not have to prove you are HIV positive to get a COVID-19 vaccine

When you get the vaccine, you may be asked to state the reason why you qualify.

You are not required to say out loud or prove you are living with HIV.

Health care workers and other volunteers at vaccine clinics can ask you if you have an immune deficiency or immuno-compromising health condition. They cannot ask you to prove which condition you have.

You do not have to prove you spoke to your doctor about getting the vaccine. However, you may be asked if you have talked with your doctor about if the vaccine is right for you.

You might also be asked if you have any allergies to the ingredients in the COVID-19 vaccine.

For more information: [COVID-19 Vaccination Recommendations for Special Populations \(gov.on.ca\)](https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/health/COVID-19/vaccination-recommendations-special-populations.aspx).

If you have been asked to prove your HIV status during a COVID-19 vaccine appointment, please follow up with your local AIDS service organization (ASO) to share your experience and get support. You can also contact the **HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario (HALCO) for legal advice**: toll-free in Ontario: 1-888-705-8889 • <https://www.halco.org>

Dealing with isolation and loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic

Many people are feeling isolated and lonely and scared right now.

We know that staying connected to others is important for our well-being. But this can be hard to do for a lot of reasons.

It is a good time to reach out to friends, family, colleagues and other supports if you are:

- ▶ not in touch with friends and family as often as you normally would
- ▶ feeling unmotivated
- ▶ feeling alone or sad
- ▶ not enjoying things.

You can contact one of the **AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs)** listed on the following pages to find out how you can stay connected and reduce feelings of social isolation.

In Ontario, AIDS Service Organizations have stayed open during the pandemic to provide telephone and virtual services and supports. This includes activities that can help with feelings of loneliness and isolation and create ways to connect with others in your community.

These include:

- ▶ virtual community get-togethers and group activities and hangouts
- ▶ wellness checks-ins
- ▶ telephone check-ins
- ▶ video support groups and counselling.

You may find additional opportunities to connect virtually through your faith community, social, hobby and sports clubs, online communities and social networks and community health care centres.



Where can I get mental health support?

COVID-19 is impacting the mental health of Ontarians. Many people are:

- ▶ feeling more stress and anxiety
- ▶ increasing their use of drugs and alcohol
- ▶ worried about their health, finances and employment.

If your workplace has an **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**, you can get a number of free telephone/virtual counselling sessions with a trained counsellor.

Make an appointment to speak to your **family doctor** or contact your **mental health care provider** if you want to talk about your mental health and wellbeing.

For help connecting with a public mental health and addictions program or support across Ontario, people living with HIV in Ontario can also contact **ConnexOntario**. It is available 24/7 and is free and confidential. Call 1-866-531-2600 (toll-free) OR visit the ConnexOntario website at <https://www.connexontario.ca>.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) provides patients, families, friends and health care professionals with general information about its mental health services, information regarding eligibility requirements, and support to self-refer for addiction services. Call 416-535-8501, and select option 2 OR visit their website at <https://www.camh.ca/en/your-care/access-camh>.

The Government of Ontario has a range of mental health supports available to you. Some of these are free, self-directed programs. Information is available at <https://www.ontario.ca/page/find-mental-health-support>.

The Ontario College of Family Physicians also provides a list of resources on mental health and addictions at <https://www.ontariofamilyphysicians.ca/tools-resources/covid-19-resources/community-supports-special-populations/ocfp-mh-patient-resources.pdf>.

eMentalHealth.ca provides a province-wide listing of free crisis lines via telephone, online and chat features at <https://www.ementalhealth.ca/Ontario/Crisis-Lines-including-Telephone-Online-and-Chat>.



AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs) in Ontario

Barrie

The Gilbert Centre

<http://www.gilbertcentre.ca>
info@gilbertcentre.ca • 705-722-6778

Brampton

Moyo Health & Community Services*

<https://moyohcs.ca> • info@moyohcs.ca
905-361-0523 *Formerly known as PHAN
(Peel HIV/AIDS Network)

Guelph

HIV/AIDS Resources & Community Health (ARCH)

<https://www.archguelph.ca> • 519-763-2255

Hamilton

The AIDS Network

<https://www.aidsnetwork.ca>
info@aidsnetwork.ca • 905-749-4898

Kingston

HIV/AIDS Regional Services (HARS)

<http://hars.ca> • 613-545-3698

Kitchener

AIDS Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo and Area (ACCKWA)

<https://www.acckwa.com>
reception@acckwa.com • 519-570-3687

London

Regional HIV/AIDS Connection

<https://www.hivaidconnection.ca>
info@hivaidconnection.ca • 519-434-1601

North Bay

AIDS Committee of North Bay and Area

<http://aidsnorthbay.com>
oaacnba@gmail.com • 705-497-3560

Oshawa

AIDS Committee of Durham Region (ACDR)

<https://www.aidsdurham.com>
info@aidsdurham.com • 905-576-1445

Ottawa

AIDS Committee of Ottawa (ACO)

<http://aco-cso.ca> • info@aco-cso.ca
613-238-5014

Bruce House

<https://brucehouse.ca> • 613-729-0911

Peterborough

Peterborough AIDS Resource Network (PARN)

<http://parn.ca> • getinformed@parn.ca
705-749-9110

Richmond Hill

CAYR Community Connections*

<https://cayrcc.org> · info@cayrcc.org

905-884-0613

**Formerly the AIDS Committee of York Region*

Sault Ste. Marie

HIV/AIDS Resource Program (Algoma GHC)

<https://www.ghc.on.ca> · 705-759-5690

St. Catharines

Positive Living Niagara (PLN)

<http://positivelivingniagara.com>

info@positivelivingniagara.com

905-984-8684

Toronto

2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations

<http://www.2spirits.com> · 416-944-9300

Africans in Partnership Against AIDS (APAA)

<http://www.apaa.ca> · info@apaa.ca

416-924-5256

AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT)

<https://www.actoronto.org>

ask@actoronto.org · 416-340-8484

Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP)

<https://asaap.ca> · info@asaap.ca · 416-599-2727

Asian Community AIDS Services (ACAS)

<http://acas.org> · info@acas.org · 416-963-4300

Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP)

<http://www.blackcap.ca> · info@black-cap.com

416-977-9955

Sudbury

Réseau ACCESS Network

<http://www.reseauaccessnetwork.com>

705-688-0500

Thunder Bay

Elevate NWO

<https://elevatenwo.org> · info@elevatenwo.org

807-345-1516

Windsor

Positive Pathways Community Services

<https://www.pozitivepathways.com>

info@pozitivepathways.com · 519-973-0222

Casey House

<https://www.caseyhouse.com> · 416-962-7600

Fife House Foundation Inc.

<https://www.fifehouse.org> · 416-205-9888

Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy (OAHAS)

<https://www.oahas.org> · 416-944-9481

Prisoners with HIV/AIDS Support Action Network (PASAN)

<http://www.pasan.org> · 416-920-9567

The Teresa Group

<https://www.teresagroup.ca>

info@teresagroup.ca · 416-596-7703

The Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (PWA)

<https://www.pwatoronto.org>

info@pwatoronto.org · 416-506-1400