



Return to Routine Optometry Care

The Alberta Government has issued a directive to allow optometry clinics to be allowed to offer routine eye exams in addition to urgent, critical and emergency care services starting on Monday, May 4, 2020.

Unfortunately, as the City of Lloydminster is governed under the Saskatchewan Public Health Act, optometrists in Lloydminster are not allowed to open to routine care on May 4 and must wait until the Saskatchewan Government lifts this location specific restriction. In the meantime, optometrists in Lloydminster may continue to offer urgent, critical and emergency care services only.

The Councils for the Alberta Association of Optometrists (AAO) and the Alberta College of Optometrists (ACO) wish to express their sincere appreciation to all optometrists for your dedication and commitment to public safety during this COVID-19 pandemic. We realize the huge financial and emotional toll this pandemic has inflicted on optometrists, their staff and their families. We also wish to thank all optometry clinics that were able to remain open to offer urgent, critical and emergency care as your efforts made a significant impact on rerouting eye emergencies from Hospital Emergency Rooms across the province.

We realize that not all optometry clinics will be able to open Monday morning as you work through rehiring staff, implementing physical changes to offices to manage social distancing requirements and ensuring your clinic has a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for use when required. **The government link for ordering PPE is:** <https://xnet.gov.ab.ca/ppe>

The care of optometric patients occasionally requires examination of the eye and surrounding tissues at a very close range. Unfortunately, this places all patients, optometrists and staff at a higher risk of potential transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

In addition, we are suffering from a health-profession wide problem of being able to access an adequate supply of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). As such, the AAO and the ACO are requesting that all optometrists use this guideline to ensure PPE is used in an appropriate and judicious manner while still reducing the chances of possible COVID-19 transmission.

Unfortunately, the government has been unable to supply all PPE orders placed with them over the past several weeks in a timely manner, so we encourage all clinics to attempt to source your own PPE until your order can be filled by the government.

Pre-appointment Triage Protocols

As optometry clinics return to offering routine care, there will be a backlog of patients who will contact your offices for an appointment. As some of these calls will be for routine care and some will be for emergency care, we ask that all clinics determine the following as part of your clinic's pre-appointment triage process:

- Identify the type and urgency of the issue or condition the patient is having to allow you to schedule the patient appropriately.
- Inform all patients that additional disinfection protocols will be in place at your clinic.
- Determine if the patient is in an "at-risk group" (e.g. elderly, immunosuppressed, in a nursing home, etc.). If they are not experiencing any issues and just want to come into your clinic for their regular eye exam, we advise that you book these patients a few weeks down the line to limit the possible virus transmission to them and allow your clinic to schedule other higher priority exams over the next few weeks.
- Determine whether the patient is currently COVID-19 positive, has been exposed to a COVID-19 patient; or, is currently exhibiting symptoms or signs of COVID-19 so that care can either be offered virtually or that appropriate precautions can be implemented for an in-person appointment.

[AHS Guide to Proper Donning of PPE](#)

[AHS Guide to Proper Doffing of PPE](#)

Patient Protocols for COVID-19 Positive Patients; Patient who have been Exposed to COVID-19 Positive Patients; and, Patients who are Exhibiting Signs and Symptoms of COVID-19

- For these types of patients, try to provide the vision care service via telehealth (rather than in-person) if this delivery model is appropriate to the patient's condition.
- If this type of patient must attend your clinic in-person:
 - These patients must don a facemask before entering your clinic.
 - These patients must use alcohol-based hand sanitizer (or wash their hands with warm soapy water) immediately upon entering your clinic.
 - These patients must maintain proper social distancing from all other patients and staff. To facilitate proper social distancing, it is considered best practice for these types of patients to be immediately taken to an examination area by the optometrist, immediately examined by the same optometrist and any required treatment services be provided by the same optometrist. Services should be

provided as quickly and efficiently as possible while still following the Guidelines to the ACO Standards of Practice and clinical practice requirements.

- The optometrist must use disposable gloves, face mask, face shield, gown and safety glasses to provide any services to these types of patients. For these patients, your PPE shall only be used **once** and then disposed of appropriately according to the ACO Infection Prevention and Control Policy.
- Disposable gloves must be discarded after providing service to these types of patients. Gloves are not meant to be disinfected and reused for multiple patients. They must be discarded in an appropriate manner.
- All surfaces that may have been touched or exposed to droplets by these patients must be immediately wiped with a disposable disinfectant wipe.

Patient Protocols for all Other Patients:

- All other patients not included in the above category must also use alcohol-based hand sanitizer (or wash their hands with warm soapy water) immediately upon entering an optometry clinic.
- All other patients not included in the above category are generally not required to wear a facemask when attending your clinic in-person. However, we encourage the wearing of face masks for immune-suppressed, elderly and other at-risk patients when attending your office in-person.

To abide by social distancing requirements, ensure that you schedule enough time in-between patient appointments so that patients are not congregating in your reception area, waiting room or dispensary. This also gives you and your staff adequate time to clean and disinfect examination areas following the completion of a patient examination.

Optometrist and Staff Protocols

- Front office and front desk staff are not required to wear face masks or disposable gloves as long as proper social distancing can be maintained. To facilitate this, clear Plexiglas (or other similar material) barriers can be affixed to reception desks; or, physical barriers can be placed in front of the reception desk to prevent patients from getting too close to the front desk.
- Optometrists and staff must change their clothing and head coverings daily. Best practice is to remove your “office clothing” before entering the living space of your personal home, place in a separate wash pile and change into new “home living clothes”. The use of office scrubs (that are changed daily) for all optometrists and staff is encouraged; however, will be at the discretion of each optometry clinic.

- Attempt to use the “Tap Option” on credit/debit card terminals for all financial transactions. If this is not available, the machine must be cleaned with a disinfectant wipe immediately after use by each patient.
- Optometrists and staff should designate dedicated work stations for each person in the office so as to not share computer stations, telephone, pens, etc.
- Anything touched by a patient (e.g. telephone, pen, intake clipboard, etc.) must be cleaned with a disinfectant wipe immediately after use by a patient. Best practice is to not allow communal sharing of anything in your clinic.
- Auxiliary testing equipment such as slit lamp biomicroscope, OCT, retinal photography, etc. should have clear breath shields affixed to them to prevent possible virus transmission by breathing, coughing or sneezing.
- Although, NCT is considered an aerosol-generating procedure, the risk of transmission is extremely low. As such, this procedure can continue to be used as long as the operator takes appropriate precautions against possible airborne exposure (droplet shield); and, that the machine is thoroughly cleaned with a disinfectant wipe immediately after each patient use. Applanation tonometry is still considered the “gold standard” for measuring IOP.
- Patients must also refrain from talking during the performance of all testing procedures such as slit-lamp, tonometry, visual field testing, OCT testing, objective refraction, ophthalmoscopy, etc. Each piece of equipment must be cleaned immediately with a disinfectant wipe after each patient use.
- Single use diagnostic drops should be used when possible. If multiuse drop containers are used, the container and dropper must be immediately discarded should the dropper come into contact with the patient’s facial skin, eyelid, lashes or tears.
- Optometrists and staff must wash their hands before and after each patient examination, pre or post testing series (e.g. if a VF and OCT are to be performed at the same time on the same patient) or dispensing encounter.
- Patients should be encouraged to attend their eye appointment by themselves or with only one additional caregiver if required. Large groups accompanying one patient should be discouraged.
- In an effort to minimize possible cross-contamination, contact lens instruction sessions should mandate that patients handle their own contact lenses and staff handle their own trial disposable lens when demonstrating proper contact lens insertion, removal, care and handling. Staff should not touch a patient’s face or eyelids during the instruction session. Contact lenses handled by staff should be discarded immediately following each contact lens instruction session.
- Even though this was mentioned above, we want to reinforce that following each patient visit, all surfaces that may have been touched or exposed to possible droplets from a patient must be cleaned immediately with a disinfectant wipe.
- All eyeglass frames touched by a patient should be washed with warm soapy water or cleaned with a disinfectant wipe before being placed back on the frame rack. All staff involved in dispensing activities must use hand sanitizer (or wash their hands with warm soapy water) before and after each patient encounter.
- Taking a patient’s temperature and using a screening questionnaire are both of limited use as they are not 100% reliable in identifying every COVID-19 positive patient. As such, we will leave their use up to the discretion of the optometrist.

- Finally, we highly encourage all clinics to continue to keep your waiting room free of materials that may be touched by multiple individuals such as magazines, children's toys, advertising materials, etc.

Following the “re-opening of our province”, Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health will continue to monitor for the possibility of a second wave of COVID-19 infections over the next few months. Should a COVID-19 re-infection issue arise in any health region or municipality, additional directives and protocols (including the possible stoppage of routine care being offered in optometry clinics) may have to be instituted again by the Alberta Government and the Alberta College of Optometrists.

Let's all do our part to reduce the possibility of a second COVID wave from happening. If you have any questions at all, please contact the Alberta Association of Optometrists and/or the Alberta College of Optometrists. Stay safe everyone.