

FAQs for Patients/Public

Nirmatrelvir/ritonavir (Paxlovid™) Outpatient Treatment

Alberta Health Services (AHS) is offering a new medication, nirmatrelvir/ritonavir (Paxlovid™) to Albertans with mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms who are at greatest risk of developing severe COVID-19 infection. Patients who might benefit from this medication can receive a prescription for the oral medication from their healthcare provider and have it filled for free at select pharmacies throughout Alberta.

Paxlovid™ is not a replacement for immunization against COVID-19. Albertans are strongly encouraged to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

What is Paxlovid™?

Paxlovid™ is a new anti-viral medication that is made up of two medications, nirmatrelvir and ritonavir, that are taken in pill form together by mouth twice a day for five days.

Has Paxlovid™ been approved for use?

Health Canada has authorized the use of Paxlovid™ to treat mild to moderate COVID19 infection that has been confirmed by testing. Learn more on the [Health Canada Consumer Information Summary](#) for Paxlovid™.

What is Paxlovid™ used for?

Health Canada has authorized the use of Paxlovid™ to treat mild to moderate COVID19 infection that has been confirmed by testing. Paxlovid™ is used to prevent these symptoms from getting worse in people who have a high risk of needing to go to the hospital for COVID-19.

Who can get Paxlovid™?

In Alberta, Paxlovid™ is approved for adults at high risk from COVID-19 (see below) who:

- have a positive test for COVID-19
- have mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms
- can receive the medication within five days from when symptoms started

Treatment with nirmatrelvir-ritonavir(Paxlovid™) should be initiated as soon as possible after a diagnosis of COVID-19 has been made, and within 5 days of symptom onset in adult patients who have either of the following:

Patients considered high risk for severe outcomes include:

1. Age 18 or older plus one immunocompromising condition

- severe immunosuppression, such as:
 - recipient of solid organ transplant
 - treatment for a malignant hematologic condition
 - bone marrow-, stem cell transplant-, or transplant-related immunosuppressant use
 - receipt of an anti-CD20 drugs or B-cell depleting drugs (such as rituximab) in the past 2 years
 - Severe primary immunodeficiencies
- Moderate immunosuppression, such as:
 - treatment for cancer, including solid tumors
 - treatment with significantly immunosuppressing drugs (e.g., a biologic in the past 3 months, oral immune-suppressing medication in the past months, oral steroid [20 mg/day of prednisone equivalent taken on an ongoing basis] in the past month, or immune-suppressing infusion or injection in the past 3 months).
 - advanced HIV infection (treated or untreated)
 - moderate primary immunodeficiencies
 - renal conditions (i.e., hemodialysis, peritoneal dialysis, glomerulonephritis and dispensing of a steroid, eGFR < 15 mL/min/1.73 m²)

Paxlovid™ is not a replacement for immunization against COVID-19. **Albertans are strongly encouraged to get fully immunized against COVID-19.** If you receive Paxlovid™, you should wait until you are fully recovered from the infection before getting a COVID-19 vaccine to ensure you get maximum benefit from the vaccine.

Patients will be required to provide a list of all current over-the-counter and herbal medications during their assessment. For a complete list of medications that may interact with Paxlovid™, visit the [Health Canada Consumer Information Summary](#).

Why is this medication limited to people with COVID symptoms for less than five days? Paxlovid™ has been shown to work best when it is used early, before the virus has moved beyond a mild to moderate infection. If you have [symptoms of COVID-19](#), it's important to get tested as soon as possible. This gives AHS time to determine if Paxlovid™ is right for you.

Can Paxlovid™ be used in patients under 18 years of age?

For patients aged 12 to 17, there has been no research on Paxlovid™ use. Paxlovid™ is not approved for use in those under 18 years of age at this time. Alternative treatment can be considered for patients 12 to 17 years of age.

How was it determined which patients are most likely to benefit from Paxlovid™?

Guidelines for which patients were considered most likely to benefit from treatment with Paxlovid™ were determined by a panel of experts based on medical research and Alberta-specific data that helped to identify groups of patients with higher chances of serious outcomes from COVID-19 disease.

How will patients be identified and informed?

You may hear about treatments from your family doctor or another healthcare provider.

If you fall into one of the categories above and are interested in getting the treatment or learning more about Paxlovid™, you may also ask your family physician if you tested positive using an at-home Rapid Antigen Test. Visit ahs.ca/covidopt for more information. If you think you might benefit from Paxlovid™ and you don't have a family physician or your physician isn't prescribing Paxlovid™ yet, you should **leave a message at 1-844-343-0971**. Staff will call you back and ask you some questions before referring you to a healthcare professional who will determine if you are eligible to receive treatment and what treatment is best suited to you.

If you are a transplant patient, tell your medical specialist or specialized healthcare team if you test positive for COVID-19. A member of your healthcare team will answer your questions, and help determine if treatment is right for you.

If you are a resident of a Long-Term Care or Designated Supportive Living facility, a primary care physician or nurse practitioner can prescribe Paxlovid™ to you if it is deemed appropriate.

Some Primary Care providers and pharmacists are prescribing Paxlovid™. For more information, please speak to your family physician or pharmacist.

What if I tested positive using an at-home Rapid Antigen Test?

If you have symptoms of COVID-19, have received a positive test result from a rapid/at home test and you are high risk for severe outcomes according to the guidelines above, there are two options;

1. Contact your family physician to book an assessment,

OR

2. Call **the dedicated line at 1-844-343-0971** and leave a message. A staff member will call you back to ask some initial questions before referring you to a healthcare provider on the Outpatient Treatment Program team.

How is Paxlovid™ given?

Paxlovid™ is taken in pill form. One dose consists of three pills that are taken twice a day over five days. Patients with a reduced kidney function may have their dose reduced to two pills twice a day for five days.

How come I have been asked to provide a list of current medications?

Paxlovid™ can interact with other medications. Providing a list of your current medications, including over the counter drugs, herbal and natural products, during your assessment will assist the clinicians in determining which treatment is best suited for you. If you do not have a current medication list, please contact your community pharmacy and they will be able to provide you with one.

For a complete list of medications that may interact with Paxlovid™, visit the [Health Canada Consumer Information summary](#).

How can I pick up my prescription for Paxlovid™?

Paxlovid™ is available through most community pharmacies throughout the province. The healthcare provider who prescribes Paxlovid™ for you will advise you of the closest pharmacy that is stocking Paxlovid™. A prescription for Paxlovid™ will be sent to the pharmacy closest to you.

Is there a charge for my Paxlovid™ prescription?

There may be a charge associated with this prescription. Please speak with your benefit provider for more information. Check here to see if it is covered by insurance <https://idbl.ab.bluecross.ca/idbl/load.do>.

Can I pick up my prescription myself?

As an individual must have active COVID-19 in order to qualify for treatment, similar to any illness, it is important to stay home as much as possible and, limit your contacts with other people. Many pharmacies also offer delivery service or curbside pickup.

How will I be monitored after receiving Paxlovid™?

If you take Paxlovid™, you will get an information sheet with your prescription.

You should continue to monitor your health. Tell your family doctor or usual healthcare provider about any side effects or COVID-19 symptoms that get worse. Or call Health Link at 811 to speak to a registered nurse. For urgent help, call 911.

You should also follow up with your family doctor or healthcare provider 10 days after your COVID-19 symptoms started.

What are the possible side effects of Paxlovid™?

According to [Health Canada](#), reported side effects include:

- altered sense of taste
- diarrhea
- muscle pain
- vomiting
- high blood pressure
- headache

Paxlovid™ is relatively new, so you may experience unexpected side effects. Please report any side effects to your family doctor. For more details on avoiding potential side effects and what to watch for, see the [Health Canada Consumer Information Summary](#).

What should I do if my COVID-19 symptoms get worse?

Even after taking Paxlovid™, your COVID-19 symptoms may continue or get worse.

- Monitor your health and tell the healthcare provider about your symptoms when they call you after your treatment.
- Call Health Link at 811 or your healthcare provider/family doctor if you have more questions or concerns.
- Call 911 right away if you have severe symptoms such as:
 - difficulty breathing
 - severe chest pain
 - feelings of confusion
 - loss of consciousness

Learn more about [managing your COVID-19 symptoms](#).

Can I get vaccinated for COVID-19 after I take Paxlovid™?

Yes. But you should wait until you have fully recovered from COVID-19. This allows your body to respond to the vaccine and develop a good level of antibodies. Paxlovid™ is not a replacement for immunization against COVID-19. **Albertans are strongly encouraged to get fully immunized against COVID-19.**

What if my COVID-19 symptoms rebound after initially getting better on Paxlovid™?

A small portion of patients may see their symptoms return within a few days of completing a course of treatment. This may be accompanied by a new positive test for COVID-19, after testing negative. At this time, it is NOT recommended that treatment be extended or repeated. See above regarding what to do if your COVID-19 symptoms get worse.

If I get treated with Paxlovid™, will it prevent me from getting Long COVID?

Some patients get prolonged symptoms after recovering from COVID-19. Although there are reports in the media of Paxlovid™ preventing this from happening, there is not currently enough medical research to support this. If you recover from COVID-19 and develop what you think are Long COVID symptoms, call Health Link at 811 or your healthcare provider/family doctor.

Can I get a prescription for Paxlovid™ for my Long COVID symptoms? Although there are some reports of Paxlovid™ benefiting patients with Long COVID, there is not currently enough medical research supporting this use. Please call Health Link at 811 or your healthcare provider/family doctor if you have questions or concerns about symptoms of Long COVID.

What if I test positive for COVID-19 again? Can I take Paxlovid™ more than once? If you test positive for a second COVID-19 infection, Paxlovid™ can be prescribed again, but you are encouraged to get vaccinated against COVID-19 once you are no longer symptomatic.

Why is Alberta using this drug?

Paxlovid™ can prevent mild to moderate COVID-19 from becoming more severe and requiring people to be admitted to the hospital. Paxlovid™ can be especially helpful for patients who might otherwise have a high risk of being hospitalized or developing more serious health problems due to COVID-19.

Is Paxlovid™ being used elsewhere?

Yes. Outpatient treatments like Paxlovid™ and Remdesivir are currently being used in many areas of Canada. AHS is working with other health authorities in Canada to learn how they are using this treatment.

For more information on the AHS rollout of all outpatient COVID-19 treatments, visit ahs.ca/covidopt.