

# COVID-19 and the Provision of Methadone and Other Substances



Serving patients undergoing opioid agonist maintenance treatment (OAMT) including methadone during the current health crisis may present significant challenges to pharmacy teams. Following the principles outlined below will increase the safe provision of care.

First and foremost,

- Assess each patient by asking if they have any [symptoms of COVID-19](#)
- Inform each patient they are not to come to the pharmacy for their dose if they have symptoms of COVID-19 but to call 811 and follow instructions

**Principle: Patients receiving OAMT should, to the greatest extent possible, maintain physical distancing by NOT presenting at the pharmacy.**

- You may consider moving patients to take home dosing if appropriate. Pharmacists should collaborate with prescribers to determine if any patients who currently have witnessed dosing could be considered for acceleration of a take-home dose schedule
- **Requirements for the use of a “Carry Policy Exemption Form (Appendix L)” are waived at this time.**
- Lockboxes adequate to accommodate the number of carries dispensed (up to 13) must be used

**Principle: If the patient must present at the pharmacy, observe strict distance recommendations.**

- If physical distancing cannot be guaranteed, use of appropriate PPE is required.
- Professionals providing care (patient assessment and witnessed dosing) maintain a distance of 2-meters from patients.
- Consider placing a demarcation line on the floor in front of the counter to create a safe distance
- Use of a transparent physical barrier will provide added protection for pharmacy professionals and for patients.
- Position a waste receptacle so patients may dispose of used cups/bottles and carry bottles themselves.
- **If a patient is screened and found to have suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection,**
  - They must be separated from other visitors and staff so that they are at least 2 metres apart (use a separate room where available) while pharmacy staff call their local public health unit and a plan for travel and further COVID-19 assessment is made.
  - If a patient is very ill, the pharmacy staff should first call an ambulance and let the paramedic operator know that the patient may have COVID-19 prior to contacting local public health.
  - After a patient with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection has left the separate space, it must be disinfected appropriately.
  - Delivery and administration at the patient’s home may be required.
  - If a patient who tests positive for COVID-19, or who has been directed by Public Health to self-isolate, and requires witnessed dosing, please contact the College for support.

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Published: March 21, 2020

Revised January 27, 2021

Revised October 19, 2021

**Principle: Educate patients on your current and potential emergency measures for providing ongoing care to mitigate patient anxieties related to withdrawal symptoms and infection. For example:**

- Explain to patients that the pharmacist initialling the record will be proof of dose(s) received.  
**Patient documentation of received dose(s), is waived at this time.**
- Provide a simple explanation regarding maintaining a distance of 2-meters between patient and care provider.
- Disposing of the empty bottle/cup into a waste receptacle must now be done by the patient.
- Empty carry bottles must still be returned to the pharmacy but must now be disposed of by patients in the presence of a pharmacist who counts and documents receipt.

**A Section 56 exemption provided by the Office of Controlled Substances at Health Canada<sup>1</sup>, gives pharmacists enhanced options to meet the needs of these patients. As of March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, pharmacists may:**

- extend/continue prescriptions for narcotic and controlled medications, and benzodiazepines. Note that pharmacists may not initiate any of these medications, but may extend, as outlined in Regulation 21.3
- adapt prescriptions for narcotic and controlled medications, for amounts equal to or less than the total dose/quantity ordered by the original prescriber
- transfer prescriptions for narcotic and controlled substances between pharmacies
- accept verbal prescriptions for narcotic and controlled medications
- This exemption is valid until September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2026

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-concerns/controlled-substances-precursor-chemicals/policy-regulations/policy-documents/section-56-1-class-exemption-patients-pharmacists-practitioners-controlled-substances-covid-19-pandemic.html>

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