

**MEMORANDUM
NOTE DE SERVICE**

TO Health Directors and Community Health Nurses
À Nicole Liboiron, Acting Director of Nursing

DATE September 29, 2021

FROM Dr. Chris Sarin, FNIHB Senior Medical Officer of
DE Health

SUBJECT: Clarification on Types of Point of Care Testing for COVID-19

Dear health directors and community health nurses,

Testing to identify cases of COVID-19 quickly has been an important activity to decrease the spread of infection in Alberta. During the pandemic, the use of point of care testing (POCT) instruments for COVID-19 in First Nations communities has been very beneficial, as they have allowed for quicker access to testing and results. I would like to provide clarity around the different types of POCT for COVID-19, when they should be used, and how each POCT practice relates to the Restrictions Exemption Program that was recently announced.

Diagnosis of Covid-19 with POCT Instruments:

Many health centres in First Nations communities have a POCT instrument (Abbott ID NOW or GeneXpert). These instruments are used for diagnosing or ruling out a COVID-19 infection. These instruments are similar to those being used in the lab. They are used to test individuals who meet specific criteria (i.e., people who have symptoms compatible with COVID-19 or tested as part of an outbreak). Trained instrument operators must follow the *FNIHB POCT and Results Management for COVID-19 Policy* and testing is completed under the authority of the FNIHB MOH. These POCT instruments should not be used to provide a negative result under the Restrictions Exemption Program or for any other type of screening. A memo has been circulated to all nurses and other health professionals trained to operate POCT instruments in health centers on the proper and intended use of the POCT instruments.

Screening for COVID-19 with Rapid POCT:

Many Health Canada approved rapid POCT devices are available on the market for routine or regular screening for COVID-19. Examples of when screening is used are: screening employees before they enter a work site, screening post-secondary students in school, screening people before they participate in a sporting event, etc.. Screening is designed to quickly identify the presence of the COVID-19 virus in persons who don't know they are infected with COVID-19 because they have no symptoms or have not yet developed symptoms. When an individual screens positive, the individual is asked to isolate and arrange for a diagnostic COVID-19 test to confirm the COVID-19 infection.

Alberta Health and the Government of Canada have publically funded rapid POCT screening programs that are free and available for organizations and communities to implement. Further information and applications are available at the following links: [Alberta Health Rapid Testing Program](#) or [Government of Canada COVID-19 Rapid Testing and Screening in Workplaces](#). Each screening program has guidelines which need to be followed, however, FNIHB does not have a role in these screening programs unless a case has been diagnosed. A benefit of screening programs such as these is that they do not require a health care worker to provide testing or oversight for the program. There are also third-party vendors with a health care professional on staff that can be hired to provide oversight, this information is contained on the Alberta Health webpage. Test results under these publically funded screening programs should not be used to provide a negative result under the Restrictions Exemption Program.

Restrictions Exemption Program (REP):

Alberta Health's [Restrictions Exemption Program](#) came into effect on September 20, 2021. This program enables businesses who fit the criteria to operate without implementing most public health restrictions. Examples of businesses that can participate in the REP are: restaurants, nightclubs, casinos, recreation facilities, weddings and funerals held in public facilities where the facility maintains the responsibility for adherence to the requirements, professional sporting events, performance events, social events held in public facilities, or adult recreational sporting groups. These businesses/events can continue as normal as long as they verify the individuals attending their site have:

- proof of COVID-19 vaccination, or
- proof of a privately-paid negative rapid test result taken within 72 hours of service, or
- documentation of a medical exemption.

Results required under the Government of Alberta's REP that came in to effect on September 20, 2021 cannot be acquired through publically funded testing (i.e., Alberta Health Services, POCT instruments in health centers, provincial or federal Rapid POCT Screening Programs, Alberta Precision Laboratories, etc.). Proof of negative results for the REP need to be acquired from a private testing company. It is recognized that access to private testing may not be equally accessible in all areas of the province, however, POCT instruments in health centres should not be used to provide proof of a negative rapid test in order to attend a business or event that is participating in the REP.

While POCT instruments and devices are valuable tools, communities or organizations that implement them should also continue to adhere to additional public health measures to reduce the transmission and spread of COVID-19. Immunization, social distancing when able, frequent handwashing/sanitizing, staying at home when sick, masking, frequent cleaning of high touch surfaces, and implementing physical barriers (i.e., plexi-glass) where appropriate are all important activities to reduce the number of COVID-19 infections.

If you have any questions about the different types of COVID-19 POCT, please reach out to FNIHB CDC Team members Deana Nahachewsky (deana.nahachewsky@sac-isc.gc.ca, 780-718-1700) or Lidia Arapis (lidia.arapis@sac-isc.gc.ca, 613-296-6783).