COVID-19 Rapid Testing Considerations for Post-Secondary Institutions

September 10, 2021

Post-secondary institutions can now return to full in-person learning for the fall 2021 semester with the safety measures outlined in in the COVID-19 Return-to-Campus Guidelines (updated September 2021) in place. Additional information, including about vaccinations and public health case management, is available in the BCCDC Return to Campus Public Health Guidance.

Upcoming Provincial Health Officer (PHO) orders will address settings in the province where evidence of vaccination will be required, including for students housed in university residences and other activities on campus. The PHO has been clear that there should be no barriers to post-secondary education related to the vaccination status of the student.

Some B.C. post-secondary institutions have proposed implementing programs of self-declaration of vaccination status by faculty, staff and students, accompanied by routine asymptomatic screening of unvaccinated individuals to help address concerns and uncertainty expressed from their communities about the return to in-person learning.

Program Approach

This document outlines a practical approach to implementing post-secondary institution-led asymptomatic point-of-care COVID-19 screening programs, while minimizing the unintentional but well documented risk of implementing broad scoped testing of asymptomatic unvaccinated individuals. It is offered to support the return to on-campus teaching, learning and other activities, a goal which is in the best interests of students and a clear goal of the PHO, other public health leaders and government.

Testing of Symptomatic Individuals: This document is specific to testing asymptomatic individuals (i.e., a person who has no symptoms of illness) who have not received any COVID-19 vaccination. Anyone with symptoms of illness, regardless of vaccination status, should follow BC Centre for Disease Control guidance on testing for COVID-19.

Routine Screening of Asymptomatic Individuals: Generally, routine screening of people without symptoms (i.e., asymptomatic screening) is not recommended by public health, and is not required for a safe return to in-person learning.

Some post-secondary institutions have chosen to implement asymptomatic screening as an additional step in their COVID-19 safety protocols, however it is important to understand and consider the benefits and the risks of doing so.

- Benefits may include an increased sense of security of faculty, staff and students, and the identification of pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic persons living or working in settings or participating in activities where there is known increased risk of transmission.
- Adverse effects may include overestimating the true COVID-19 incidence (thereby decreasing a sense of safety), higher rates of both false positive and false negative results, identification of persons who are post-infectious who are no longer considered infectious, negative health and psychological impacts on those being tested (including anxiety), and misinterpretation of data leading to unwarranted and harmful restrictive policies (Surkova, 2020). There is also the opportunity cost of using resources that may be more beneficial elsewhere.

Prior to implementation, post-secondary institutions are strongly encouraged to:

- Consider the significant logistical challenges and financial investment inherent in implementing a large-scale screening program.
- Assess the vaccination rates of their faculty, staff and students (e.g., campus survey) to ensure a program would provide benefit. If they choose to proceed with a rapid testing program, vaccination rate information should be used to inform implementation[1].

All programs should effectively manage and mitigate adverse impacts, and follow BCCDC best practice guidance on the use of point-of-care COVID-19 screening and testing.

When developing their approach, post-secondary institutions should consider:

- **Impact on those being tested:** Including risks and benefits.
- **Feasibility**: Ensure the volume of testing is operationally feasible, recognizing the need to communicate results to all those tested on a timely basis.
- **Re-Testing with Positive Result**: Ensure those tested understand that if they test positive, they will also need to get a COVID-19 test on campus or at a test centre. Those living in on-campus housing should be supported to self-isolate while they await their test result.
- **Evaluation**: Any program should identify clear milestones, including an end point, and should be evaluated regularly to determine if it is meeting its intended goals/is effective, as well as to identify when it is no longer necessary. This could include tracking the prevalence of positive tests to consider how they related to the local community prevalence of positivity for COVID-19[2] or setting a target vaccination rate for the on-campus community.

[1] Work is ongoing to define a vaccination coverage rate, above which asymptomatic screening is unlikely to provide benefit.
[2] Test positivity rate is generally a reflection of community transmission (i.e., transmission in households and social networks). Based on epidemiology and studies to date, a test positivity of 1-5% can be expected, depending on the setting and population. COVID-19 Data, including current provincial test positivity, is available from BCCDC.

Implementation Options

Option 1 (Preferred): Asymptomatic testing for specific student populations on campus

Post-secondary institutions may consider focussing their approach on testing those unvaccinated students who may be at increased risk for COVID-19 based on their activities or housing. These may include:

- Unimmunized students living in on-campus student housing
- Unimmunized student athletes
- Other student populations based on advice from local public health

The following implementation approaches should be considered:

- Testing no more than once per week per individual, OR
- Testing of a randomly chosen subset or reference group (e.g., random sample, alternating weeks) as opposed to the entire population

Option 2: Asymptomatic testing for large, low risk unvaccinated populations on campus

Post-secondary institutions may consider broad testing of unvaccinated populations on campus, recognizing this presents a significant operational challenge.

The following implementation approaches should be considered:

- Testing of a randomly chosen subset or rotating reference group of the unimmunized cohort as opposed to the entire population.
- Testing for limited period of time, until a certain vaccination threshold is achieved.

Operational Requirements

Post-secondary institutions must follow the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA) program process to apply. Those interested can e-mail RapidPOCTeam@phsa.ca for an intake assessment form. Organizations will be required to enter into an agreement with PHSA. The process generally takes at least two weeks. Additional information on implementation, including access to testing kits and training, is available from BCCDC. Take home testing is not yet approved by Health Canada and is not recommended outside of study settings.

Reporting Guidance

Health professionals who conduct point-of-care tests are required to report positive tests through the provincial eForm Point-of-Care application provided by PHSA.

Your local Medical Health Officer/public health will provide guidance for management and follow-up when there are clusters of confirmed cases requiring additional action.