

**Massachusetts Department of Public Health Guidance**

**Reopen Approach for Health Care Providers**

**Phase 4: New Normal**

**NOTE:** **This Phase 4: New Normal guidance, effective March 22, 2021, replaces and supersedes all prior reopening guidance for acute care hospitals and other health care providers.**

**I. Introduction**

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) continues to work with state, federal, and local partners on the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2, and we continue to appreciate the essential role you have in responding to this evolving situation.

Beginning March 22, 2021, the Commonwealth will move into Phase 4: New Normal of the State’s reopening process. DPH issues this guidance for all health care providers setting minimum standards for continued provision of services during Phase 4: New Normal of the Commonwealth’s reopening process without jeopardizing health system capacity or the public health standards that are essential to protecting health care workers, patients, families, and the general public. DPH recognizes the importance of ensuring that this guidance promote equitable access to care, including high-priority preventative care, across all communities and patient populations, including low-income communities, communities of color, children, and individuals with disabilities.

This guidance replaces and supersedes all previously issued health care reopening guidance issued by the Department.[[1]](#footnote-2)

This guidance does not enumerate any service, program, or sector-specific requirements; health care providers must continue to adhere to all applicable service, program, or sector-specific guidance available on the [state COVID-19 guidance](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-public-health-guidance-and-directives) website. Acute care hospitals must also ensure ongoing compliance with the requirements of the COVID-19 Resurgence Planning and Response Guidance.

**II. Public Health and Safety Standards During Phase 4: New Normal**

During Phase 4, health care providers must continue to comply with all [state COVID-19 guidance](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-public-health-guidance-and-directives). This includes, but is not limited to, DPH guidance on: a) [personal protective equipment (PPE)](https://www.mass.gov/doc/updated-comprehensive-personal-protective-equipment/download), b) [hospital visitation](https://www.mass.gov/doc/hospital-visitor-restrictions-guidance/download), c) [considerations for health care personnel after vaccination](https://www.mass.gov/doc/considerations-for-health-care-personnel-after-covid-19-vaccination/download), and d) [return to work guidance](https://www.mass.gov/doc/return-to-work-guidance/download) for all workers.

A. Personal Protective Equipment and Other Essential Supplies

During Phase 4, health care providers must continue to follow the most recent guidelines issued by DPH[[2]](#footnote-3) that align with the CDC as it relates to PPE usage, including any updated guidelines released subsequent to the date of this guidance. In addition, health care providers must continue to:

1. Ensure that they have adequate supply of PPE and other essential supplies for the expected number and type of procedures and services that will be performed. To meet this requirement, providers may not rely on additional distribution of PPE from government emergency stockpiles.
2. Develop and implement appropriate PPE use policies for all services and settings in accordance with DPH and CDC guidelines. Health care providers must maintain sufficient PPE volume on-hand to align with use as directed in the [DPH comprehensive PPE guidance](https://www.mass.gov/doc/updated-comprehensive-personal-protective-equipment/download).
3. Ensure all staff have appropriate PPE, consistent with DPH guidance, to perform the service or procedure and any related care for the patient. If appropriate PPE is not available to protect the health care workers involved in the patient’s care, the service/procedure should be cancelled.

B. Workforce Safety

During Phase 4, health care providers must continue to:

1. Restrict the number of health care workers in the treatment space to those individuals necessary to complete the service or procedure for the patient.
2. Have a written protocol in place for screening all employees for symptoms of COVID-19 prior to entering the facility or office.
3. Adopt policies that address health care worker safety and well-being.
4. Ensure providers and staff can socially distance to the maximum extent possible (see Section II.D).

C. Patient and Client Safety

During Phase 4, health care providers must continue to:

1. Have a process for screening patients, clients, and support persons for symptoms of or known exposure to COVID-19 prior to entering the office/facility.
2. Have policies and procedures for screening patients or clients in advance of a service or procedure, or participating in a program, including policies and procedures to facilitate the testing of patients or clients for COVID-19 when medically appropriate as well as for determining whether a procedure should proceed if a patient tests positive.
3. Have policies addressing visitation, special circumstances, and patient or client companions that align with DPH visitation guidance. Special circumstances and populations may include end-of-life care, prenatal care, pediatric patients, behavioral health patients, patients with intellectual or developmental disabilities, patients with physical disabilities, or populations as otherwise identified by DPH.
4. Require that all patients, clients, companions, and visitors wear face coverings as consistent with DPH guidance.[[3]](#footnote-4) However, the health care provider may consider waiving the requirement for face coverings for patients, clients, and/or companions in special circumstances consistent with applicable guidance.
5. Ensure patients or clients can socially distance to the maximum extent possible (see Section II.D).

D. Infection Control

During Phase 4, health care providers must continue to:

1. Demonstrate adherence to social distancing and relevant guidelines from DPH and CDC regarding infection control and prevention to maintain a safe environment for patients, clients, and staff.
2. Implement administrative and environmental controls that facilitate social distancing, such as minimizing time in waiting areas, including by asking patients or clients to wait outside until their appointment begins to the greatest extent possible. For any waiting patients or clients, social distancing and face coverings must be in place.
3. Minimize contact between patients or clients through active scheduling practices, such as establishing different times of day or separate space to mitigate the risk of exposure to COVID-19.
4. Have signage to emphasize public health measures (i.e., distancing, coughing etiquette, wearing of face coverings, and hand hygiene) and provide access to hand sanitizer for patients, clients, and staff.
5. Have an established plan for thorough cleaning and disinfection of all common and procedural areas, including in-between patient encounters in treatment rooms, which may require hiring environmental services staff and reducing patient hours to allow for more frequent cleaning.

Health care providers should continue to utilize telehealth services where clinically appropriate and feasible. Telehealth will continue to be useful in chronic disease management and for patient access to care.

**III. Compliance and Reporting**

*Written Policies and Protocols*

Each health care provider must continue to implement written policies and procedures that meet or exceed the requirements of the Commonwealth’s reopening guidance or incorporate the requirements of this guidance into its existing policies and procedures. Such policies, protocols, and documentation must be developed with input from staff or workforce representation, and must be regularly updated and made available to DPH upon request at any time.

*Compliance*

DPH will continue to monitor a range of public health metrics, including COVID-19 prevalence, testing and positive test rates, and hospital bed capacity, and may issue further guidance at any time. Acute care hospitals must continue to comply with COVID-19 Resurgence Planning and Response Guidance as updated on March 22, 2021.

1. This includes Phase 1 guidance effective May 18, 2020 and updated May 25, 2020, Phase 2 guidance effective June 8, 2020 and updated June 24, 2020, and Phase 3 guidance effective July 6, 2020 and updated November 3, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Please see: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-guidance-and-directives>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Please see: <https://www.mass.gov/news/wear-a-mask-in-public>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)