

August 9, 2021

The Honourable Jason Kenney  
Premier of Alberta  
307 Legislature Building  
10800 97 Avenue  
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6 via email [premier@gov.ab.ca](mailto:premier@gov.ab.ca)

Dear Premier Kenney,

On behalf of the AMA Section of Pediatrics, we are writing to express our grave concern regarding Alberta's plan to eliminate COVID-19 testing in the community, contact tracing and mandatory isolation this month. The removal of monitoring measures, combined with the recent removal of public health restrictions such as the mask mandate, will further accelerate the spread of the Delta variant which is already growing exponentially in Alberta.

Alberta currently has the highest number of active cases in Canada, and our R-value of 1.5 is the highest it has been throughout the pandemic. Evidence shows that the Delta variant is more contagious than seasonal influenza and spreads as easily as the chicken pox virus. Over 1.5 million Albertans remain unvaccinated and over half a million children under 12 are still ineligible for the vaccine, which leaves us far from reaching herd immunity and nowhere near the endemic phase of COVID-19. As we near the start of the school year, a lack of mitigation and monitoring measures will result in a situation where the fourth wave will cause COVID-19 to spread quickly throughout unvaccinated populations and children. This poses a high risk to children and families for the following reasons:

- High numbers of COVID-19 infections in children translate to higher numbers of children who develop serious illness such as Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in children (MIS-C) or severe COVID-19 pneumonia.
- Although it is relatively rare for children to become seriously ill with COVID-19, the PICU beds in Alberta generally operate at 100% capacity and could be overwhelmed if COVID-19 becomes widespread in schools and community settings.
- Delta variant is a novel virus with unknown long-term implications on the health of children. Evidence suggests that between 3-12% of children suffer from long COVID-19 even after mild infection.
- Removing widespread community testing and contact tracing eliminates the ability of families to make risk-based decisions regarding school, childcare, and extracurricular activities. Halting mandatory isolation could result in families limiting their children's activities to avoid COVID-19 exposure, which will negatively impact their mental health and development. This is particularly the case with children who have medical conditions or are immunocompromised.

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- Marginalized families (racialized, Indigenous, frontline workers, and those of low socioeconomic status) will be disproportionately affected by the lack of measures since they often cannot choose to keep their children home in instances of high community transmission.
- Recent studies have shown that fully vaccinated individuals can carry high viral loads and efficiently transmit the Delta variant. Thus, vaccinated Albertans will unknowingly be vectors for spread to children and the immunocompromised as community transmission continues to rise precipitously.

We have seen rapid increases in pediatric hospitalizations in Florida and Louisiana upon abandoning their protective measures (while maintaining their testing and contact tracing), and Louisiana has already reinstated their indoor mask mandate in response to this rise. Testing, tracing, and isolating are the tenets of disease control in public health and are supported by national and international organizations including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). There is no scientific basis to abandon these measures during the start of a fourth wave of the pandemic. Further, the CDC recently reversed their indoor mask policy, stating that children and fully vaccinated individuals should be wearing masks indoors in areas of high COVID transmission.

Vaccine trials in children under 12 years old are underway and vaccines for this age group will likely be approved in the next six months. It is imperative that we continue to protect our children and vulnerable populations with other risk mitigation measures until children under 12 years of age can be vaccinated, and we have either reached herd immunity (85% of Albertans are immunized) or the endemic phase of COVID-19 ( $R_t \leq 1$ ). We strongly recommend continuing with the following measures until then to protect our citizens and ensure a safe return of children to school:

- Access to provincially funded, community testing for those showing signs/symptoms of COVID-19. Removal of AHS testing facilities in favor of testing at physician's offices decreases test access, risks overburdening primary care offices, and puts vulnerable patients at risk of acquiring COVID-19 in clinic waiting rooms.
- Contact tracing by public health professionals rather than reliance on self-tracing.
- Mandatory isolation for individuals that test positive for COVID-19.
- Mandatory indoor masking in public spaces, including schools.
- Regular reporting of COVID-19 case numbers and transparency regarding outbreaks.

Failure to do so is an abdication of our responsibility to protect those who may not be in a position to protect themselves.

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Sincerely,

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