

Patient updates

Dec. 23, 2021

Dear patients,

We are writing to review our virtual and in-person visit options for a health care appointment. In this communication, we will share information about:

- Guidance for booking virtual appointments:
 - What is a virtual appointment?
 - How you book a virtual appointment
 - How to prepare for your virtual appointment
 - What types of concerns can be addressed virtually?
- What types of concerns should be assessed in person?
- What to do if you have COVID symptoms
- When should you visit an emergency room

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are making every effort to protect patients, the public and staff. This involves requiring pre-booked appointments, postponing all routine or non-essential visits and delivering as much care virtually as safely as possible.

Due to the volume of calls, please expect longer than usual wait times before your call is answered. If you do not need to speak to a member of our team you can email your request for an appointment via our email service at FHTBookings@smh.ca.

Guidance for booking virtual appointments

With the increased spread of the Omicron variant, you will in most cases be scheduled for a virtual appointment first instead of in-person appointment. This is to help minimize the number of people in clinic at one time. Additionally, with increased spread in the community, many patients may prefer limiting time spent travelling on public transit. Below we will review what types of medical

appointments can be done virtually, and when you may need to be seen for in person care.

Please note: If you have an existing in-person appointment, continue to come in. If we have to change any existing appointments, we will contact you.

What is a virtual appointment?

A virtual appointment with your provider happens over the telephone or video conference rather than in-person. Virtual appointments can be a safe, effective, and convenient way for you and your family to access care for many common health issues.

If English isn't your first language, interpretation services provided over the phone are available to support your virtual appointments. If you wish to use the interpretation service for you or your family member, please let us know when you book an appointment.

How you book a virtual appointment

You can book a virtual appointment by calling your clinic or emailing fhtbookings@smh.ca

How to prepare for your virtual appointment

Here are a few tips to remember when taking part in a virtual medical appointment:

- You **MUST** physically be in Ontario during your virtual visit. If you are not, you will need to seek care from a physician where you are located.
- You will be provided with a time for your virtual appointment. Your provider may call you earlier or later than the specified appointment time, so please be sure you are close by your phone/computer/tablet at least 15 minutes before and 30 minutes after the specified time.

- The caller ID may say “St Michael’s Hospital” or “Unknown Number”.
- Please ensure you are in a private space where you feel comfortable sharing your health information. It may be better to request an in-person appointment if you don’t have a private space available to you.
- Your provider may ask you to send photos, forms, or complete an online questionnaire before or after your virtual appointment. Please monitor your email for these requests, including looking in your junk folder.

What types of health concerns may be effectively assessed through a virtual appointment?

Below are some examples of medical concerns that can be safely assessed initially with a virtual visit:

- * Acne
- * Allergy symptoms - nose/eyes
- * Blood test requests
- * Bug bites
- * Chronic conditions that are stable (e.g., heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease, asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure)
- * Cold sores or lip issues
- * Family planning
- * Eye issues - e.g., pink eye, styes (go to nearest emergency department if having sudden vision changes)
- * Fatigue
- * Form/document completion requests
- * Lice
- * Mental health issues (e.g., mood changes, anxiety)
- * Prescription renewals: You can also request your pharmacy send us a renewal request. Please note that renewals for controlled substances such as stimulants, opioids, and benzodiazepines may require an in-person appointment.
- * Rash or skin concerns (option available to send photos in advance of visit for provider review; please do not send photos of genitalia or other sensitive areas)

- * Referral requests for physiotherapy, massage, chiropractic, or other allied health discipline
- * Shingles
- * Sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing
- * Smoking cessation or substance use questions (e.g., alcohol, cannabis, other drugs)
- * Test result review
- * Urinary symptoms
- * Vaccine questions or forms

If after the virtual visit your provider needs to see you in person, they will ask you to book an in person visit after your virtual appointment.

What types of health concerns should be assessed in-person rather than virtually?

Some health concerns are better-assessed in-person. These include things that your doctor or nurse practitioner would need to see or touch in order to make a diagnosis or provide treatment, including:

- *Pain in the stomach area
- *Breast, Genital, or Anorectal issues
- *Ear issues
- *Receiving a vaccine
- *Prenatal and well-baby visits

What to do if you have COVID-19 symptoms?

With increased community transmission of the omicron variant, many people may experience COVID-19 symptoms in the coming weeks. COVID-19 causes a range of symptoms that vary from person-to-person. Some people may experience mild or no physical symptoms. Symptoms can take up to 10 days after exposure to COVID-19 to appear, and include new or worsening:

- Fever > 37.8° C and/or chills
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Sore throat
- Cough – new or worsening
- Trouble breathing
- Decrease or loss of smell or taste
- Very tired, sore muscles and joints (age 18 + only)
- Nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea (age < 18 only)

If you are a close contact of a confirmed case of COVID-19, you should also monitor for these additional symptoms and get tested:

- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Stuffy nose
- Ongoing abdominal pain
- Headache (new and unexplained)
- Pink eye
- Lack of appetite (young children)

If you have any of these symptoms, we recommend you [get tested](#) and self-isolate until you get the results. If you are unsure, you can complete a [self-assessment](#) online. This will provide guidance on if you need to get a test.

We do not have any rapid tests in our clinics and are not scheduling appointments in the clinic to do testing. We are also aware that testing centres are full and getting an appointment can be a challenge. Unfortunately, without a test, it is impossible to know if your symptoms are from COVID-19 or another virus. If you cannot get a test, or do not wish to be tested, we recommend isolating from 10 days of symptom onset. This will help reduce any possible spread to others. If you live in a home with other people, these people should monitor for symptoms and also isolate or test if they develop any symptoms.

If you are concerned about the severity or length of your or your family member's symptoms, you can call and book a virtual visit or ask to speak with a member of our team if urgent.

Please note that medical notes are not required for return to work or school following COVID-19 symptoms.

For more resources on how to manage symptoms at home, please review [Toronto Public Health's website](#). You can also learn more about what it means if you are determined to be a [close contact](#) of a confirmed COVID-19 case, and what you will need to do.

When should you visit the Emergency Department?

There are situations in which your symptoms may be potentially dangerous or life-threatening. **If you are experiencing the symptoms noted below, please dial 911 (or ask a family member/friend to dial 911).**

- * Severe chest pain
- * Severe shortness of breath
- * Continuous vomiting and inability to drink any fluids
- * Serious trauma or injuries (i.e., bleeding that won't stop, deep cuts, broken bones)
- * Sudden loss of vision
- * Sudden onset weakness of the face or arm/leg
- * Sudden inability to walk or talk

We thank you for your patience and understanding as we shift back to more virtual care. On behalf of our teams, we wish you a happy and safe holiday season.

Take care and be well.

SMHAFHT Leadership Team