



May 28, 2020

Dear Patients,

It has been almost a month since our last email update went out. In many ways, a lot has changed since then: the rate of new COVID cases has dropped, we avoided the surge that was once feared in our hospitals and ICUs, Ontario has begun taking steps to open up further, and beautiful sunny weather has (finally!) arrived. In many other ways however, our situation remains fundamentally the same: the crisis rages on in our nursing homes and long-term care facilities, and a second surge is a distinct possibility. As much as we are all to be congratulated for our collective efforts to date, COVID-19 is still with us-- and we must remain vigilant to avoid and mitigate its spread.

On an individual level, this means many things: Continue to practice diligent and frequent hand hygiene. Wear a mask when you go out, especially in stores or other enclosed indoor spaces. Avoid congregating in large groups. But above all, please remember that just because newer guidelines suggest we *may* go out more, it does not mean that we *must*. The best way to minimize your exposure and avoid infecting others is to maintain physical and social distancing where possible.

On a clinic level, the reality is that this “new normal” is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. As of this week, the directives physicians have received from the government and our professional medical associations have changed, such that “all deferred and non-essential and elective services carried out by Health Care Providers may be gradually restarted”. This will mean that previously postponed treatments such as necessary but non-urgent surgeries and preventative screening tests will be starting up again relatively soon. However, it does not mean that medical practice will be returning to business-as-usual any time soon. Unquestionably, infection-control guidelines and safety-focused protocols remain in effect, which markedly reduce our ability to have in-office assessments. We will continue to rely on virtual care (ie. phone, email, video) whenever possible for the time being, in order to minimize spread of COVID-19, conserve Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and save in-person capacity for those patients that really need it.

With the above in mind, we would like to take this opportunity to inform or remind you of a few things:

GETTING IN TOUCH

- If you have a **new or acute concern**, contact our office (via phone or DSG Secure Email). If we cannot help you virtually, we will schedule an in-office assessment if necessary or else direct you appropriately.
- If you are anticipating a call back from us, please **remember that our phone number may show up as blocked or “No Caller ID”**... Please answer the phone regardless!

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- Please do wear a face mask if you do have to go out in public, particularly indoors. Likewise, if you do need to come into our office for any reason, **please wear a mask.**

CHECK-UPS & MEDICAL REVIEWS

- Since the beginning of the provincial shut-down, we have had to cancel previously scheduled Complete Physicals/Periodic Health Exams. Please note that due to the ongoing risks associated with elective/non-urgent visits like these, we have now **canceled all Complete Physicals** through the rest of the summer.
- If you have a medical concern, **don't wait "until this is all over"** so you can come in again. Frankly, you might be waiting a long time! Many issues can be appropriately managed virtually. If you have concerns, don't save them up-- reach out to your physician. Where possible, we can review virtually, and even arrange appropriate tests if necessary.

SCREENING & TESTS

- Most preventative screening (such as pap tests, mammograms, and colon cancer screening) has been on hold for the past two months. While a delay of a few months should not be worrisome, it will eventually be important to get overdue preventative screening done in a reasonable timeframe. **We will try to notify you once screening tests are more widely available and encouraged again.** That said, if you have specific concerns or personal risk factors, contact your family doctor to discuss.
- **Labs and most Diagnostic Imaging clinics are now open**, although are now generally only seeing patients by appointment (rather than via walk-in). If you are due for bloodwork or imaging tests, contact your preferred lab or clinic. Links to some local options can be found on our website. Of note, should it be necessary, some labs will arrange to come to your home for testing (for a fee).

COVID TESTING

- COVID-19 testing criteria has been continuously changing throughout the pandemic, and most recently it has been broadened further to include asymptomatic patients (people who do not have any symptoms). **If you think you should get tested, go to one of the COVID Assessment Centres:** <http://covid19toronto.ca>
- At this time, no one who presents to an Assessment Centre will be refused a test. However, if you do not have symptoms but are concerned about having potentially been exposed to the virus, the recommendation is to **consider waiting four to eight days from the time of exposure.** Given the incubation

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period of the virus, this will help prevent the occurrence of false negative tests.

- As of writing this letter, **COVID Antibody Tests (via blood tests) are NOT recommended or widely available in Ontario**. There is a lot of uncertainty surrounding these tests, particularly with regard to their accuracy as well as whether the presence of antibodies truly suggests immunity to COVID-19. While we are aware that Antibody Tests are starting to become available (for sale) from some sources in the city, we would caution against over-interpreting their results at this time. It is hoped that accurate tests will be approved and widely available in the near future, but until such time we are unable to recommend them or counsel effectively around their use.
 - Article on Antibody Tests - *National Post* (May 27, 2020):

<https://nationalpost.com/news/was-that-covid-19-antibody-tests-could-now-tell-us-how-many-have-really-been-exposed>

IN-PERSON ASSESSMENTS

- Whether in our office, at an Assessment Centre, or in the Emergency Department, please know that **all precautions are being taken to keep the environment as safe as possible**. In all locations, you will find staff wearing PPE equipment (scrubs, masks, visors, gloves, and/or gowns), and exam areas are thoroughly cleaned between every patient encounter.
- **If you need to go to the Emergency Department: GO!!!!** Emergency Medicine staff continue to report cases of patients delaying seeking medical care due to the pandemic, which sadly can lead to avoidable complications and outcomes. Examples of symptoms that might necessitate a visit to the ER regardless of COVID-19 include:
 - Chest pain
 - Weakness on one side of the face/body
 - Shortness of breath/severe difficulty breathing
 - Sudden severe headache
 - Severe or prolonged abdominal pain
 - Mental Health crises

This pandemic has not been easy for anyone. At the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, at Generations we are unabashedly proud of how we have been able to remain open and available for our patients while still responding to the many challenges posed by this crisis. While the inclination to lament all that we've lost is natural and unavoidable, we hope it is not overly optimistic to think that some good may well come out of this crisis. We may never quite go all the way back to the way things used to be-- but we *can* emerge from this stronger, safer, and better equipped to continue to care for each other effectively and compassionately.

Best wishes,

GFHC staff

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