



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Health**

# General guidance for community pharmacies during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Purpose

This publication provides advice and information to community pharmacies to support them in operating safely and effectively and minimising disruption to services during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly where community transmission is occurring.

This guidance is relevant to all community pharmacies in Western Australia (WA). The Department of Health recognises that every community pharmacy is unique and that there will be the need to adapt and implement this advice taking into consideration individual circumstances.

This guidance does not replace the need for pharmacists and community pharmacies to exercise professional judgement and comply with relevant laws and professional standards.

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA) and The Pharmacy Guild of Australia (PGA) have produced other COVID-19 information for community pharmacy, including more detailed operational information and resources which are available on their websites.

## Background

Community pharmacies are an essential public service; providing readily accessible healthcare advice and supply of prescription and other medicines to the broad population.

Community pharmacists are often the first professional point of contact within the health system for people seeking information about health-related concerns.

Community pharmacies have roles in managing the COVID-19 pandemic whilst also ensuring ongoing provision of business-as-usual services.

This includes:

- Ensuring a safe environment for both the public and pharmacy staff
- Timely and appropriate referral of patients presenting at the pharmacy with potential COVID-19 symptoms
- Informing, counselling and educating the public about disease prevention and infection control
- Providing advice about, and participating in, the national rollout of COVID-19 vaccination
- Stock management and maintenance of supply of prescription medicines and devices, other pharmacy medicines and infection control items.

The information in this guideline was updated in April 2021. However, information about COVID-19 continues to evolve and recommendations may need to be updated in the future. In the event of information mismatch, primary source documents rather than this guideline should be followed.

## Considerations for community pharmacies

Pharmacy staff should be made aware of current guidance about COVID-19, particularly in relation to infection control measures and managing potentially infected customers in the pharmacy environment. Current information about COVID-19 issued by WA Health is available at: [https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A\\_E/Coronavirus](https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Coronavirus).

Suspect and probable case definitions, testing criteria and clinical guidelines are regularly amended. Please refer to the most recently available information available at: [https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A\\_E/Coronavirus/COVID-19-clinical-alerts](https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Coronavirus/COVID-19-clinical-alerts).

Consumer focussed health related information about COVID-19 is available on the [Healthy WA website](#).

It is important that pharmacists and other pharmacy staff stay up to date about local outbreaks and restrictions due to COVID-19. Information is available on the WA Government website about COVID-19 for [the community and businesses](#) as well as [the official 'state of emergency' directions](#).

## Ensuring a safe environment

To reduce the risk of infection transmission within pharmacies it is important to minimise the duration of exposure and contact between patients and pharmacy staff.

### General measures

- Position patient information posters so they can be easily seen and read by patients **before** they enter premises and at key locations within the pharmacy.
- Signage (posters, billboards etc.) outside the pharmacy should clearly display a telephone number so people who are unwell can call the pharmacy rather than enter the store. Poster and signage resources:
  - [PSA COVID-19 resources](#)
  - [PGA COVID-19 resources](#)
  - The Commonwealth Department of Health has [COVID-19 resources](#) intended for consumers, some of which are translated into other languages
- Signage outside the pharmacy should indicate the maximum number of customers allowed in the store according to the [current restrictions in WA](#). [During Phase 4](#), the 2m<sup>2</sup> rule per customer applies and the calculation of the maximum number of people allowed in the pharmacy at any one time excludes pharmacy staff.
- Pharmacies are required to keep a contact register for customers entering the pharmacy. Pharmacies must register their business on the [SafeWA](#) app and provide the relevant QR code so customers can check in using the app. A paper-based form for collecting contact details must also be available.
- Where possible create one entrance and one exit and encourage one-way traffic through the pharmacy. Use tape to cordon off areas and floor markers to direct patients and indicate 1.5m spacing between people in queues.
- Within the pharmacy, people should be advised to keep a distance of 1.5m from others
- Patients 'ringing ahead' who have symptoms of respiratory illness should be advised NOT to attend the pharmacy and to contact their GP or the WA Coronavirus information helpline on 13COVID (13 268 43).
- The best way to reduce the risk of infection is good hygiene including regular hand washing with soap and water, use of alcohol-based hand sanitisers and avoiding direct or close contact with others.

- It is not recommended that pharmacy staff wear face masks as a routine precaution, unless there is a specific public health direction in place that mandates mask wearing.
- Protective gloves are not recommended as they do not protect against transmission of the virus following physical contact with patients or surfaces and may impair the requirement for frequent hand washing or use of hand sanitisers. Protective gloves used when touching patients during examination or during vaccine administration should be disposed after each individual patient contact.
- Pharmacy staff should implement procedures for regular cleaning and disinfecting of the working environment (see below).
- Encourage use of contactless payment methods to minimise the handling of cash within the pharmacy.
- The [COVID-19 Home Medicines Service](#) is available for vulnerable people in the community, including those in quarantine or isolation, to order and receive their PBS/RPBS medicines by home delivery.
- In circumstances where community transmission is known to be occurring:
  - consider appointing a member of staff to 'triage' and advise patients and to control numbers of people entering the pharmacy;
  - where possible, deliveries to the pharmacy should be done without external parties entering the pharmacy, or at least, the non-public areas of the pharmacy;
  - consider allocating a room or area within the store where people presenting with symptoms and who are unable to travel or who become critically ill, can be held whilst arrangements for transfer are made.

### **Principles of infection prevention and control in community pharmacy**

- Promote good cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene
  - Keep distance where possible from people who have influenza-like symptoms.
  - Cough or sneeze into your arm or a disposable tissue.
  - Dispose of used tissues, and clean hands afterwards.
- Promote regular and thorough hand-hygiene by staff and patients
  - Hand hygiene significantly reduces the spread of COVID-19.
  - Hand hygiene can be done using soap and water or a waterless alcohol hand rub/foam. The Department has issued a [How to wash hands poster](#).
- Keep the environment clean
  - Additional cleaning should be used for frequently touched surfaces such as benchtops, handles, telephones, keyboards and tills.
- For patients
  - Display signage/posters in the pharmacy to encourage patients to practice hand hygiene, cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene.
  - Put alcohol-based hand sanitiser dispensers in prominent places around the pharmacy especially at counters where surfaces are touched.
  - Use physical distancing of 1.5m where possible. Speak to patients from a safe distance to avoid contact with respiratory droplets.
- For pharmacy staff
  - Ensure staff have access to handwashing facilities and alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
  - Staff with respiratory symptoms or fever should stay at home.

- Physical distancing should be used where practicable
  - Within a pharmacy environment this means attempting to keep a distance of 1.5m between all people and ensuring that the applicable person per square metre limit is not exceeded. During Phase 4, the limit is one person per 2m<sup>2</sup>.
  - Use floor markers to indicate appropriate distances to separate people in queuing areas.
  - Speak to patients from the other side of a counter or desk where possible.
  - Physical barriers between pharmacy staff and patients e.g. Perspex screens on counters may afford extra protection against virus transmission in busy areas.
  - Pharmacists undertaking direct clinical services (e.g. vaccinations) may wish to consider the use of additional personal protective equipment (PPE) such as a mask and gloves when seeing at risk patients.

### **Cleaning using a detergent and disinfectant**

- Regular environmental cleaning in the pharmacy is important for reducing the risk of transmission of pathogenic organisms.
- Pharmacy staff can ensure that the pharmacy is clean and hygienic by cleaning surfaces using a detergent and disinfectant. This can be either by a 2-step cleaning/disinfecting process or using a product that combines both steps.
- Using a detergent:
  - A detergent facilitates the removal of dirt and organic matter
  - Most hard surfaces including counters can be adequately cleaned with warm water and a neutral detergent as per the manufacturer's instructions
  - Allowing the cleaned surfaces to dry is an important aspect of cleaning
  - Routine cleaning of hard floors with detergent and water is recommended.
- The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) suggests that disinfectants containing ≥ 70% alcohol, quaternary ammonium (e.g. benzalkonium chloride) or diluted household bleach are [suitable for use against COVID-19 virus](#).

### **Waste Management**

- Ensure closed bins are provided for safe disposal of tissues by staff and patients.
- There are no special controls required for disposing of waste - follow routine processes for disposal.

### **Management of patients presenting with symptoms of COVID-19**

- Anyone presenting at the pharmacy with symptoms of respiratory tract infection should self-identify through use of signage or 'triage' by a staff member before entering the pharmacy. Ideally, symptomatic patients should NOT enter the pharmacy. This is particularly important when community transmission is known to be occurring.
- Coronavirus can cause a range of symptoms, ranging from mild illness to pneumonia. Symptoms can include:
  - Fever (which can include a temperature of 37.5°C or more, night sweats and chills)
  - Acute respiratory symptoms such as coughing, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose
  - Acute loss of smell or taste.
- Symptomatic patients should be given a surgical mask to wear during the pharmacy visit.

- If it is necessary to provide care to any patient who is a suspect or confirmed case of COVID-19, staff should use contact and droplet precautions, as detailed in the Department's [Advice for use of personal protective equipment for non-healthcare workers in community settings](#).
- Patients presenting with symptoms who are too unwell to travel or who become critically ill should be invited into a designated isolation area. Pharmacy staff are advised to call the WA Coronavirus information helpline 13COVID (13 268 43) **or an ambulance if the patients has severe symptoms such as difficulty breathing.**
- Following patient transfer out of the pharmacy, the isolation area and any other parts of the store where the patient has been should be closed off and cleaned with detergent and disinfectant.
- **The pharmacy does NOT need to automatically close if a potential COVID-19 patient enters the pharmacy.**
- Staff do not need to automatically be off work if they are in contact with a COVID-19 patient. The Commonwealth Department of Health has issued [information on work attendance for healthcare workers](#).
- Should contact tracing identify the premises as a location visited by a confirmed case or identify staff as being close contacts of a confirmed case, both the pharmacy and any staff will be contacted by WA Department of Health public health personnel.

### Accessing personal protective equipment (PPE)

- Community pharmacies should source PPE through their normal or alternative suppliers.
- [Practice Assist](#) is providing access to a limited stockpile of surgical masks for general practices, community pharmacies and allied health practices. An [order form](#) is available.

### Consumer information about disease prevention and infection control

Health professionals, including pharmacists, are key to ensuring appropriate messaging about the COVID-19 response.

Key messages for consumers include:

- Maintain physical distancing wherever possible
- Practice good hand hygiene
- Stay home if sick and get tested.

The WA Department of Health has run a number of public information campaigns to remind consumers that COVID-19 is not over and to remind consumers to continue to practice COVID safe behaviours. [Campaign materials](#) and [other resources such as downloadable posters](#) are available online.

Health related information about COVID-19, for WA consumers, is available on the [Healthy WA website](#).

Information about [border controls, quarantine requirements and other aspects of the WA COVID-19 response](#) is available on the general WA Government website.

Patients should be advised to contact the WA Coronavirus information helpline 13COVID (13 268 43) for advice.

### Managing stocks and supply of medicines, devices and infection control products

Pharmacies have a responsibility to ensure access to medicines during the pandemic and should consider allocation and management of unreasonable requests, or suspected stockpiling that could precipitate shortages.

The TGA has published information regarding medicine supply and limits at <https://www.tga.gov.au/behind-news/coronavirus-covid-19-information-medicines-and-medical-devices>. Specific advice for consumers on COVID-19 limits on dispensing and sales at pharmacies available at: <https://www.tga.gov.au/media-release/covid-19-limits-dispensing-and-sales-pharmacies>.

## **Pandemic and business-as-usual continuity planning**

Every pharmacy should have in place a contingency plan outlining its strategies to ensure ongoing service provision following potential disruption caused by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus and the increased burden of COVID-19.

Managers and pharmacists-in-charge should ensure all pharmacy staff are informed about the actions being taken in response to COVID-19 and that roles and responsibilities are clearly communicated.

Consideration should be given to surge staffing and reallocation of staff duties to manage an increase in pharmacy activity that may result from COVID-19 and absenteeism as staff become unwell or need to stay home to care for family members. Strategies to minimise the risk of transmission between staff members should also be implemented.

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia has developed a [guide for community pharmacy](#) and a [pandemic preparedness checklist](#) that contain further information.

## **Professional services**

At times when community transmission is occurring, pharmacy activities and services that are non-essential or which require direct patient contact may need to be restricted or suspended. Consider additional protective measures when providing essential services, including vaccinations, that require direct patient contact, as well as dispensing and handling prescriptions, cash and other paperwork.

## **Signing of prescriptions**

Pharmacists are reminded there is no requirement under Western Australian law for patients/agents to sign for the receipt of prescription items.

Signing for the receipt of pharmaceutical benefit scheme (PBS) items is a requirement under the Commonwealth *National Health Act 1953*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commonwealth Government has issued a '[special arrangement](#)' which means patients and their agents do not have to sign for receipt of PBS items where this is impracticable.

The sharing of pens for signing prescriptions or other documents presents an opportunity for the spread of COVID-19. Where possible, patients or agents should be encouraged to use their own pen if they have one with them. Any pens shared between patients/agents should be cleaned between each use.

## **Provision for ongoing supply of prescribed medicines**

The WA Chief Health Officer has issued a temporary, special authority that permits supply of Schedule 4 medicines from a pharmacy in WA in circumstances where a patient doesn't have a current prescription. See [Advice for pharmacists supplying medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)



## Changes to opening hours or pharmacy closure

In the event that a pharmacy needs to reduce its hours of operation or close, this should be clearly communicated to the community and relevant stakeholders including relevant regulatory authorities, as quickly as possible. Collaboration with surrounding pharmacies is recommended where possible to ensure ongoing availability of pharmacy services. Pharmacies located in isolated areas should be particularly mindful of the need to ensure ongoing service provision and work in collaboration with other local health care providers where possible.

Continuity of care remains essential, particularly for the following groups of patients:

- Receiving dose administration aids (both community patients and those in Residential Aged Care Facilities)
- Receiving opioid replacement therapy
- On staged supply arrangements
- With prescriptions kept on file
- Where supply or delivery arrangements exist.

In particular, any CPOP pharmacy considering the need for temporary closure due to COVID-19, must make alternative arrangements for all CPOP clients prior to closure. Affected pharmacies should, as soon as possible make contact with the:

- Community Pharmacotherapy Program (CPP) on 08 9219 1913; and
- Department of Health on 08 9222 6812.

Copies of all current patient prescriptions and dosing histories must be forwarded to CPP to assist with client relocation.

A notice should be attached to the pharmacy shopfront advising CPOP clients to call their prescriber or the CPP for assistance.

## Further information

- Australian Government Department of Health  
<https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-resources>
- Government of Western Australia Department of Health  
[https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A\\_E/Coronavirus](https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Coronavirus)
- Therapeutic Goods Administration  
<https://www.tga.gov.au/behind-news/coronavirus-covid-19-information-medicines-and-medical-devices>
- Pharmaceutical Society of Australia  
<https://www.psa.org.au/coronavirus/>
- Pharmacy Guild of Australia  
<https://www.guild.org.au/resources/business-operations/COVID-19-Information>
- Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia  
<https://www.shpa.org.au/covid-19>

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### Authority

Department of Health Western Australia.

These guidelines are for staff working in pharmacies in Western Australia. They are based on information available at the time of writing and may change as more information becomes available. These guidelines are a guide only and patients should be managed on a case-by-case basis.

**This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with disability.**

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