

Palliative Care Resources to Support Frontline Providers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Health care providers are now in the midst of delivering care in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Available data on cases of COVID-19 suggest that older patients and those with chronic medical conditions may be at higher risk for severe and fatal illness. As a result, as the virus continues to spread, the demand for palliative care will continue to grow.

Recognizing that palliative care specialists already have limited capacity to provide palliative care, frontline providers need to be prepared, supported and empowered to deliver the necessary care to address the needs of their patients. This document collates key resources to enable frontline providers to provide primary level palliative care.

As a patient's, their family and caregivers' needs increase, become more complex and/or change over time, it may be necessary to engage a palliative care specialist or other disease specialists for consultation, advice and mentorship. The Regional Palliative Care Network (RPCN) directors and clinical co-leads can be a valuable resource for guidance and access to clinical tools, as well as helping to connect with specialists at the local level. **Please reach out to Info@ontariopalliativecarenetwork.ca to obtain contact information for your local RPCN leadership team.**

NOTE: The content in this document is based on information available as of April 20, 2020.

Support for Difficult Discussions, and Crisis Communication

Ensuring the patient understands the nature and severity of their illness, and exploring their goals of care are crucial conversations to support decision-making and enable person-centred care.

Hospice Palliative Care Ontario has posted several Goals of Care conversation guides developed by Drs. Steinberg, Incardona, and Myers specifically tailored to patients with COVID-19, in different care settings. These guides are available here: <https://www.speakupontario.ca/>

In addition, practical advice on how to talk about difficult topics related to COVID-19, including specific phrasing for patient and family conversations has been developed by VitalTalk, and is available here: <https://www.vitaltalk.org/guides/covid-19-communication-skills/>

Finally, the Center for Loss and Life Transition has developed a resource that provides guidance around how to talk to children of adult patients who die of COVID-19:

<https://www.centerforloss.com/2020/03/children-about-cornavirus/>

Symptom management

Managing symptoms for patients with palliative care needs will be everyone's role. The usual guidelines for symptom management remain appropriate. Specific attention to dyspnea, delirium, nausea and vomiting, and pain will be particularly relevant for patients dying as a result of COVID-19.

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Note: There is ongoing debate about the use of Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and corticosteroids in the face of COVID-19 infection. Prescribing clinicians should keep abreast of the evolving clinical advice and balance that with the specific needs of the patient.

British Columbia Inter-professional Palliative Symptom Management Guidelines

Best practice symptom management guidelines that are available in both interactive and printable formats: <https://bc-cpc.ca/cpc/publications/symptom-management-guidelines/>

McMaster University Symptom Management Guidelines

The Division of Palliative Care, Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University have developed Protocols for Symptom Management of Patients with COVID-19, available here:

<https://fhs.mcmaster.ca/palliativecare/documents/McMasterSymptomManagementProtocolsCOVID31March2020.pdf>

End-of-life Care for COVID-19

Patients with COVID-19 have unique needs at the end of life. The Ontario Palliative Care Network synthesized recommendations from various guidance documents to create an Ontario specific one page summary document ***Symptom management for adult patients with COVID-19 receiving end-of-life supportive care outside of the ICU.***

<https://www.ontariopalliativecarenetwork.ca/sites/opcn/files/EndOfLifeSymptomManagement-COVID19.pdf>

For a small number of patients who have severe, refractory symptoms at the end of life, rapid titration or Continuous Palliative Sedation Therapy (CPST) may be needed. The Division of Palliative Care, Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University have developed a ***Continuous Palliative Sedation Therapy Protocol For COVID-19 Pandemic.***

<https://fhs.mcmaster.ca/palliativecare/documents/McMasterPalliativeSedationProtocolCOVID31March2020.pdf>

A group of emergency physicians and palliative care physicians have also developed a more in-depth guidance document ***End-of-life care in the Emergency Department for the patient imminently dying of a highly transmissible acute respiratory infection (such as COVID-19).*** It is available on the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians website: <https://caep.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EOL-in-COVID19-v5.pdf>

The above three resources are applicable to multiple care settings.

Note: There are reports that patients with COVID-19 can deteriorate quickly and have rapid progression of symptoms. Both sets of recommendations outline low starting doses of opioids. Clinicians need to be prepared to titrate doses quickly in the face of worsening symptoms. Consulting with local palliative care specialists may be helpful for guidance.

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Digital Platforms

- Guidance resource for integrating virtual care from Ontario Health Quality and Ontario Telemedicine Network
https://quorum.hqontario.ca/Portals/0/Users/170/54/10154/Draft%20Clinical%20Guidance_Adopting%20and%20integrating%20virtual%20visits%20into%20care_V1.pdf?ver=2020-03-13-091936-370
- Virtual care and the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Ontario MD
<https://www.ontariomd.ca/pages/virtual-care-tools-for-physician-practices-to-help-practices-contain-the-spread-of-2019-ncov.aspx>
- Changes to the Schedule of Benefits for Physician Services (Schedule) in response to COVID-19 influenza pandemic (Billing Information)
<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/ohip/bulletins/4000/bul4745.aspx>

Support for Health Care Professionals

- Hospice Palliative Care Ontario is offering Psychosocial and Spiritual Supports for Health Care Workers during COVID-19 through online sessions on Emotional, Spiritual & Compassionate Care. The sessions can be accessed here: <https://www.hpco.ca/psychosocial-spiritual-support/>
- de Souza Institute is organizing weekly virtual psychological support groups for clinicians to discuss fear, normalize stress reactions, share solidarity, and learn about effective coping strategies to build resilience and enhance coping. <https://www.desouzainstitute.com/2020/03/24/4307/>
- The Canadian Psychological Association has produced a fact sheet for *Emotional and Psychological Challenges Faced by Frontline Health Care Providers during the COVID-19 Pandemic*.
https://cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/PW_COVID-19_FrontLineHealthCareProviders.pdf

Additional Resources

- The Ontario Palliative Care Network has a Palliative Care Toolkit with best-practice tools to support palliative care delivery: <https://www.ontariopalliativecarenetwork.ca/en/node/31896>
- The Centre for Effective Practice has developed clinical and practical COVID-19 guidance for primary care providers, which includes a specific section on Primary Care and Palliation: <https://tools.cep.health/tool/covid-19/#managing-covid-19-primary-care-and-palliation-new>
- Canadian Virtual Hospice has compiled links on COVID-19 for providers and the public, which includes a comprehensive listing of grief and loss support resources
http://www.virtualhospice.ca/covid19/#grief_and_loss
- The Regional Geriatric Program of Toronto has collated clinical guidance, tools, and links for health providers caring for older adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
<https://www.rgptoronto.ca/resources/covid-19/>
- Hospice Palliative Care Ontario has developed and compiled a variety of COVID-19 resources for various sectors and settings, focused on the following topics Advance Care Planning, Health Care Consent, Goals of Care, Caregiving, Compassionate Communities, and Hospice Palliative Care. For more information, please see <https://www.hpco.ca/>

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- The Center to Advance Palliative Care has created a toolkit that covers important areas for palliative care teams and for clinicians caring for patients with serious illness in the context of the United States health care system: <https://www.capc.org/toolkits/covid-19-response-resources/>
- The Supportive Care Coalition provides resources to support caregiver well-being. Their website also include a link to resources to address the impact of COVID-19 on palliative care practice: <https://supportivecarecoalition.org/caregiver-wellbeing>
- Oxford University Press has published *A Field Manual for Palliative Care in Humanitarian Crises*, that is free to access online, and is available here: <https://oxfordmedicine.com/view/10.1093/med/9780190066529.001.0001/med-9780190066529>

Palliative Care Education

There are various **educational offerings** available to build capacity among providers:

- Pallium Canada offers Learning Essentials Approaches to Palliative Care (LEAP), a suite of interprofessional courses and workshops that address generalist-level competencies for health care professionals working in different settings. Until August 31, 2020, Pallium, in collaboration with the Canadian Medical Association, is offering all health care professionals free access to several LEAP online modules. The available modules include:
 - Taking Ownership
 - Advance Care Planning
 - Decision-Making
 - Managing Dyspnea
 - Palliative Sedation
 - Last Days and Hours
 - Delirium
 - Pain Management
 - Palliative Care for COVID Illness – Module A
 - Palliative Care for COVID Illness – Module B

Find out more here: <https://www.pallium.ca/course/covid-19-response-free-online-modules/>

- The de Souza eLearning centre offers Interprofessional Education in Palliative and End-of-Life Care (IEPEC-O), a self-directed online course that covers a comprehensive curriculum in palliative and end-of-life care topics, including core competencies in symptom management, ethical issues and communication skills in palliative care. Find out more here: <https://my.desouzainstitute.com/courseCodes/view/EOLC>
- The Palliative Pain and Symptom Management Consultants (PPSMCs) provide secondary-level hospice palliative care expertise through consultation, coordination, collaboration, facilitation, education, skill development, research and evaluation. <http://www.pccnetwork.ca/> Typically, PPSMCs offer a variety of interdisciplinary courses at the local and regional level, however, these have been paused or cancelled during the pandemic period.