

Enhanced testing strategy

What improvements are you making to speed up the process for COVID-19 testing?

- We are doubling capacity at the IWK's primary assessment centre to increase the speed of testing for children.
- The IWK will start using the gargle test to diagnose COVID-19 in children ages four to 18. The aim is to quickly making it available for children at all primary assessment centres.
- An online booking for testing appointments will be established to reduce the wait time to book an appointment. This builds on the online [COVID-19 self-assessment](#) that's already in place.
- We are expanding most primary assessment centres around the province with larger locations, longer hours and more staff so that Nova Scotians can get tested faster.
- Lab capacity in Halifax will increase to process 2,500 tests per day by mid-November.
- We are adding a piece of equipment in Sydney to process tests there instead of sending them to Halifax.

When will the online booking be in place? How will it work?

We aim to have the online booking system in place by mid November. It will work much like online booking systems people are already familiar. You will choose the location for your test and a date and time from the available time slots.

When will the primary assessment centres be expanded?

The primary assessment centre for children at the IWK Health Centre will be fully operational by the third week of October. We have already started expanding most other centres around the province and will anticipate completing that work by mid-November.

How much more capacity with the IWK have?

The IWK's primary assessment centre will double its capacity. It will expand from three rooms to six and increase from 85-90 tests per day to about 196 test per day.

When will the gargle test start? Will the IWK offer only the gargle test or will it also offer the nasal swab?

The IWK's primary assessment centre will start the gargle test October 7. They will offer both types of tests. Sometimes a gargle test is not possible and a nasal swab must be used.

There seems to be a big focus on children. Are they at greater risk than we thought?

COVID-19 presentation and transmission in children is not yet fully understood. Children, especially younger children, appear to experience less severe symptoms due to COVID-19. Although younger children may be less likely to transmit COVID-19, emerging evidence suggests the virus can spread efficiently in school-age children.

Expanding capacity at the IWK and around the province means we can get students with symptoms back to school quickly if they do not have COVID-19. Many students will have symptoms that are the same for colds, the flu and COVID-19. We need to test them quickly so they can get back to school if they test negative and so that public health can quickly manage any cases in schools.

Why is the gargle test starting as a pilot?

We need to operationalize the gargle test on a small scale before expanding. We aim to roll it out to all primary assessment centres quickly as possible.

Why is the gargle test only available for children? Some adults may find it more comfortable as well.

While many adults may prefer the mouth rinse and gargle option, for now it is only available to school-aged children. We will look at expanding it in the future.

How many more tests will the labs be able to do? When will this increased capacity be in place?

The QEII lab in Halifax will increase from 1500 tests per day currently to 1800 per day by mid-October and to 2500 per day by mid-November.

The lab at Cape Breton Regional Hospital in Sydney will get new equipment to process tests there without having to send them to Halifax.

How does the COVID-19 self-assessment work?

Instead of calling 811, people can complete the [COVID-19 self-assessment](#) online. If a test is required, people will be prompted to enter their contact information. The Nova Scotia Health Authority or IWK Health Centre will call within 24 to 48 hours to book an appointment. By mid-November, people will be able to book the appointment themselves online.

Does this mean 811 is no longer taking phone calls about COVID-19?

If you cannot access the [COVID-19 self-assessment online](#), you can call 811 to be screened for testing. If you have questions or concerns about your symptoms, you can call 811 and speak to a nurse. Also, the self-assessment may refer you to call 811 if your responses suggest screening by a nurse is needed.

Can an online self-assessment really replace talking to an experienced 811 nurse? Wouldn't it be better to hire more 811 nurses and add more phone lines?

Other jurisdictions have been successfully using online self-assessments. People can still call 811 if they cannot access the online tool or wish to speak with a nurse about their symptoms.

What if people really need the assurance of speaking with an 811 nurse rather than an impersonal online self-assessment?

811 is still available if people feel they need to speak with a nurse. However, the 811 [COVID-19 Self-assessment](#) is much faster to determine if you need testing, which many people will likely find reassuring.

How do you know you're going to catch all the right people with an online self-assessment? Isn't there a risk that some people who should get a COVID test don't screen in and vice versa?

That may happen in some cases but we'll be monitoring closely and will make adjustments to the assessment if necessary to ensure that we capture everyone who needs to screen in for testing.

What if the online self-assessment tells someone they need a COVID test when they really should be getting other urgent medical attention?

The assessment asks some clarifying questions at the outset to direct people appropriately. It will direct you to 911 if your response suggests you need emergency medical attention. It will direct you to 811 if your response suggests you need to speak with a nurse about your situation.

If the booking system is still by phone, will there still be a long wait to get an appointment?

We're adding more resources to the booking teams for the primary assessment centres to ensure appointments are booked in a timely fashion. Once you complete the self-assessment, they aim to call you within 24 to 48 hours. Also, we aim to make more improvements to the entire testing process in the near future. By mid-November, people will be able to book the appointment themselves online.

What is all of this going to cost? Where is the money coming from?

We are investing some of the \$289 million Safe Restart Agreement funding to these enhancements to our testing strategy, as well as through partnership between Health and Wellness, Nova Scotia Health Authority and the IWK Health Centre. We are still determining some of the costs.