

Memo**Date:**

June 13, 2023

To: Providers who offer cervical screening

From: Angie Wong, A/Assistant Deputy Minister, Health Programs and Delivery,
Ministry of Health

Judy Linton, Executive Vice President, Clinical Institutes and Quality
Programs & Chief Nursing Executive, Ontario Health

Sacha Bhatia, Senior Vice President, Population Health and Value-Based
Health Systems Executive, Ontario Health

Re: Turnaround time for cytology testing

The Ministry of Health (ministry) and Ontario Health have been working with community laboratories to address turnaround times for cytology (Pap) testing for cervical screening. Each laboratory has a plan in place to return turnaround times to expected service levels and address backlogs in processing tests while meeting all provincial legislative and regulatory requirements related to privacy and the protection of personal health information, quality standards and reporting.

Over the past year and a half, the turnaround time for cytology (Pap) testing for cervical screening internationally, in jurisdictions in Canada, and in community laboratories across Ontario has exceeded typical service standards. Contributing factors to delays include a surge in screening volumes as patients sought routine screening that had been delayed due to the pandemic and a shortage of cytotechnologists to review test samples. Understandably, these longer-than-usual wait times for laboratory results can be frustrating for both patients and providers.

As a short-term strategy to improve turnaround times, some laboratories have sent tests to other laboratories in Ontario, outside the province or outside the country. In these situations, all provincial legislative and regulatory requirements related to privacy and the protection of personal health information, quality standards and reporting are expected to be met by the laboratories.

Thanks to these continued efforts and the ministry's additional investments of approximately \$5 million to the community laboratory sector to specifically address the delays and backlogs, turnaround times have improved in recent months. As of May 2023, most patients are receiving their results in four months or less, with tests identified as urgent by health care providers being expedited and completed within the service standard. We expect turnaround times to continue to improve, with a goal that the majority of patients will receive their results within the typical service standards of 10 to 14 days by the end of the summer.

While clinical experts at Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) have indicated that temporary specimen processing delays, such as those observed in Ontario, are unlikely to impact diagnosis or treatment due to the long natural history of the human papillomavirus (HPV) infection and cervical pre-cancer and the potential for abnormal cell changes to resolve on their own, we recognize and fully appreciate that waiting to receive results can cause patients to feel anxious.

As we continue our efforts to improve turnaround times, providers should continue to screen eligible patients in accordance with Ontario Cervical Screening Program recommendations. Should you have any questions about turnaround times, please contact your laboratory service provider.

Thank you for your ongoing dedication to delivering high-quality preventative care to people across Ontario.