Closure of GP respiratory clinics: communications pack October 2023

All Victorian Government funded GP respiratory clinics are due to cease operations as of 31 October 2023. This pack contains key dates, actions and key messages for primary health networks and their stakeholders.

Key dates

Date	Action and responsible
From 18 October 2023	**All Victorian PHNs** to communicate key messages (below) to primary care and other stakeholders. This article by NWMPHN's GP adviser can also be adapted and distributed as appropriate: *Are you ready to welcome COVID-19 patients back into your rooms?*
23 October – 31 October 2023	**All Victorian PHNs (including HealthPathways/care pathways teams)** and **Victorian Department of Health** to audit websites in preparation for closure – which pages and news articles need to be updated?
23 October 2023	**All Victorian PHNs**: social media post 1 (see below).
24 October 2023	**All Victorian PHNs** to distribute local media releases (as appropriate): Where to seek care now that GPRCs are closing.
1 November 2023	**All Victorian PHNs** to distribute statement of key messages to primary care, publish it on website and link via home page/other relevant pages (as identified in audit). **HealthPathways/care pathways** websites to be updated.
November 2023 – January 2024	**All Victorian PHNs**: social media post 2 (see below). Recurring posts/paid advertising as appropriate.

Key messages

When are GP respiratory clinics closing?

All Victorian Government funded general practice respiratory clinics (GPRCs) have ceased operations as of Tuesday, 31 October 2023.

Why are GPRCs closing?

This project is supported by the Victorian Government

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GPRCs were conceived and funded as a valuable temporary response in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was around 50 operating from 2020 to 2022; this number has decreased to 16 as of October 2023.

Demand for GPRC services has decreased significantly in recent months. The Victorian Government is expected to close the remaining 16 GPRCs on 31 October 2023, when the 2023 influenza season ends.

Earlier this year, all general practices were able to access nationally funded Strengthening Medicare grants to boost their capability to safely and effectively treat patients with respiratory symptoms, and make other improvements to their practices. Even before these grants, many practices were regularly and safely treating patients with respiratory symptoms, and have done so throughout the pandemic.

The pandemic response and the health care services available has changed significantly since GPRCs were established in 2020. The population is highly vaccinated and other mitigation factors are common. New services such as the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department and priority primary care centres are also taking the pressure off general practices and hospital emergency departments.

We thank all GPRC owners, operators and staff for their dedication to protecting the health of Victorians through delivering life-saving services. We also thank the many thousands of other primary care workers who have also provided testing and care for patients throughout the pandemic.

Where can patients with respiratory symptoms seek care?

If you test positive for COVID-19, it is likely your symptoms will be mild and you can recover safely at home. Visit the healthdirect website for information on managing COVID-19 at home and what to do if your symptoms worsen.

Patients with mild to moderate symptoms (including confirmed COVID-19) can seek care from their usual GP, or another GP if their usual one isn't available. Most general practices provide care for patients with respiratory symptoms, both by telehealth and face-to-face. Telehealth appointments are suitable for most low-risk patients.

If you are unable to get an appointment with a GP you can use the healthdirect service finder to find one, or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

Patients with **urgent** but non-life-threatening symptoms can see a GP at a priority primary care centre. If you are unable to attend a priority primary care centre, contact the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department.

GPRC closure comms pack
Version: 1.2

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Page 2 of 5

If you are attending a face-to-face appointment and have respiratory symptoms, you should inform the clinic, wear a mask and follow the clinic's protocols. For example, they may be asked to wait in a car or an isolation room.

In an emergency visit your local hospital emergency department or call 000.

Where can patients access COVID-19 antiviral medication?

These medicines are available to eligible patients by prescription only. A GP can assess if you need these medicines and prescribe them for you or refer you to a hospital.

The best health care professional to prescribe these medicines is your regular GP. They understand your medical history, risk profile and details of other medications you may be taking. They can work with you to determine if antiviral medication is suitable for you.

If you are unable to get an appointment with a GP and you are an eligible patient who urgently needs a prescription for COVID-19 antiviral medication, contact your closest priority primary care centre. Or, if you are unable to attend a priority primary care centre, contact the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department.

You can also call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24 for advice.

Visit the Victorian Government website for more information on COVID-19 testing and antiviral medication.

What are the COVID-19 testing options once GPRCs close?

Rapid antigen tests (RATs) are the easiest way to test for COVID-19. Visit the Victorian Government website for information on when to use a RAT, where to get them, and what to do once you find out your result.

Most people will only need to take a RAT to find out if they have COVID-19. People who are at risk of severe COVID-19 illness may need a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test.

If you are at risk of severe COVID-19 illness, your RAT result is negative or inconclusive, and you require a PCR test:

- Visit your GP. They will decide if you need a PCR test based on your symptoms and medical conditions. They may give you a referral to a pathology collection centre.
- If you have a referral from your GP, go to a pathology collection centre. Your GP should be able to tell you where your closest one is. Don't forget to take the referral from your GP with you.
- If you are unable to get a GP appointment, you can contact the following services for

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Page 3 of 5

advice:

- o [NURSE-ON-CALL](#) on 1300 606 024
- o [Victorian Virtual Emergency Department](#) (if it's urgent but not life-threatening).
- In an emergency call 000.

Please note that priority primary care centres (PPCCs) **do not** provide routine PCR testing. They provide GP-led care for people with urgent but non-life-threatening conditions. If you are at risk of severe COVID-19 illness and require a PCR test, and your usual GP isn't available, a PPCC can provide a referral to a pathology centre.

Primary care providers can visit their [local HealthPathways or care pathways website](#) for localised clinical and referral information for patients with respiratory symptoms.

What happens in emergency situations such as thunderstorm asthma, COVID-19 or other disease outbreaks?

In thunderstorm asthma events and other emergencies, [priority primary care centres](#) and the [Victorian Virtual Emergency Department](#) will support many general practices, hospitals and other health services in providing urgent care to Victorians in need.

The Australian Government is establishing a GPRC panel to be activated during respiratory emergencies. The GPRC panel is a group of clinics who will be required to activate quickly to provide health services to people with mild to moderate respiratory symptoms in emergency situations. The Australian Government conducted a [tender process](#) to establish this panel in January 2023; PHNs are yet to receive further details.

Social media posts

Social media post – 1

Option 1:   Option 2:
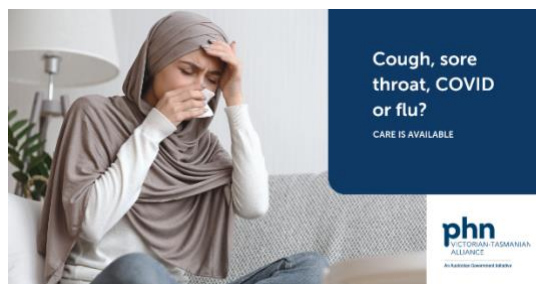

Suggested copy:

All Victorian Government funded general practice respiratory clinics are due to cease operations on Tuesday, 31 October 2023.

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Page 4 of 5

Visit our website to find out what other care options are available. [LINK]

Social media post – 2

Option 1:

Option 2:

Suggested copy:

If you test positive for COVID-19, it is likely your symptoms will be mild and you can recover safely at home.

If you need to see someone, your usual doctor can help – both by telehealth and face-to-face.

It is important to remember to wear a mask and follow your practice's instructions if you are seeing your doctor face-to-face.

If your usual doctor isn't available and you require urgent but non-life-threatening care, please contact the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department online at www.vved.org.au or see a doctor at a priority primary care centre https://bit.ly/3NbQxo7

Visit our website to learn more: [LINK]

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Page 5 of 5