

COVID-19 Travel and Vacation Guidelines and FAQs

Current as of November 6, 2020

The information in this document is a companion to the [Vacation Toolkit](#). Refer there for additional questions, and contact your [HRBP Advisor](#) for additional support.

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Current Obligations Regarding International Travel due to COVID-19:

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta have put in place emergency measures applicable to all Alberta Health Services (AHS) employees, regarding travel outside of Canada ("International Travel"):

- Upon re-entry to Canada, all individuals must self-isolate for a 14 day period (*Minimizing the Risk of Exposure to COVID-19 in Canada Order (Mandatory Isolation), No. 4.*);
- All individuals who are returning to Alberta after having travelled internationally must be in isolation for a minimum 14-day period (*Alberta CMOH Order 05-2020*). (Please note that in some rare circumstances the [Expedited Return to Work Process](#) may apply.)
- An Official travel advisory is in effect by the Government of Canada to avoid all non-essential International Travel.

Please note that the returning [international traveler testing pilot project](#) (starting in Alberta on Nov 2, 2020) does not apply to AHS workers. All AHS healthcare workers, including physicians, returning from travel outside of Canada are required to adhere to the [AHS fit for work screening](#) and the isolation requirements as determined by the [return to work decision chart](#). AHS or Covenant workers — including staff, physicians, contractors, students and volunteers — would not be permitted to return to work at any AHS or Covenant facility or within the community until 14 days after returning from travel outside of Canada. Where feasible, AHS healthcare workers may work remotely while isolating, with leader approval.

Failure to follow travel advisories may leave staff unable to return to Canada and possibly ineligible for health and other benefits. The required quarantine period following international travel also has the potential to negatively impact patient care. As such, AHS continues to advise all employees **against all non-essential** International Travel while emergency measures and travel advisories remain in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What are the Guidelines for Essential & Non-Essential International Travel?

Effective November 9, 2020 and until further notice, all AHS employees who carry out International Travel will be subject to the following:

a) Non-Essential International Travel:

- Employees will be expected to advise their manager of their **non-essential** international travel in advance of their departure, and specifically provide notice of their expected date of return to Canada. This expectation applies regardless of whether employees are using their vacation time or their scheduled days off during the period of travel including the 14-day isolation period.
- Employees will be responsible to ensure that prior to their departure, they have approval for all time away from the workplace (approved vacation, shift trades, or unpaid leaves of absence), for their non-essential international travel, **including the required 14-day isolation period.**
- Examples of non-essential international travel include:
 - A vacation or leisure travel;
 - To visit a friend or family member, including family reunions; or
 - To spend time at a property located outside of Canada.
- The granting of requests for absences from the workplace for non-essential international travel, will take into consideration the following:
 - Anticipated operational pressures over the period of the entire absence;
 - Anticipated availability of replacement staff over the period of the entire absence;
 - Any other operational factors relevant in the area;
 - The opportunity to work from home during the required isolation period; and
- Pre-approved non-refundable International Travel that was booked prior to March 25, 2020 [the implementation date of the mandatory 14-day isolation for returning travelers]. Employees will be required to provide evidence that the non-refundable International Travel was purchased prior to March 25, 2020, and if so, the manager is strongly encouraged to approve the additional 14 day absence required for the isolation period.
- Effective November 9, 2020, Employees will **not** be eligible for paid sick leave or the use of sick hours for the 14-day self-isolation period if the reason for the self-isolation is a direct result of non-essential international travel taken by the Employee. Note: the AFF (for in-scope employees) or AFG (for NUEEs) time codes can still be used for the 14-day self-isolation period following essential international travel. Refer to the [COVID Time Reporting Scenarios](#) for more information.
- Employees who choose to engage in non-essential international travel, and fail to account for the required 14-day self-isolation period within the requested time off, may be subject to discipline and attendance management.

b) Essential International Travel:

- Employees will be expected to advise their manager of their **essential** international travel in advance of their departure, and specifically provide notice of their expected date of return to Canada.
- Employees will be required to provide proof that the International Travel was essential, and upon request, provide documentation supporting the reason for the essential travel.
- When essential international travel is required, managers will work with employees to accommodate their requests in a timely manner.
- Examples of essential international travel include:
 - Travel for the attendance of a funeral or end of life visit of an immediate family member of the Employee. (Immediate family member as defined in the applicable Collective Agreement or family member as per the Non-Union Exempt Employees Terms & Conditions of Employment);
 - Non-discretionary leaves where international travel is required;
 - For international adoptions; or
 - Essential medical treatments where international travel is required.
- Employees will continue to be eligible for paid sick leave, salary continuance or short-term disability for the 14-day self-isolation period if the reason for the self-isolation is a direct result

of essential international travel taken by the Employee.

- Refer to the [COVID Time Reporting Scenarios](#) for applicable self-isolation time coding direction and time reporting codes for essential international travel.
- Leaders are reminded that absences related to COVID-19, including required isolation periods for essential international travel, should not be considered in relation to the Attendance Awareness Program. Discuss with your [HRBP Advisor](#) if you have questions.

Travel Restrictions while conducting AHS Business:

Effective March 12, 2020 and in accordance with [Government of Alberta's direction](#), all AHS business travel outside of the country is suspended until further notice.

All non-essential business travel outside of the province is suspended until further notice. Essential travel may be approved at the discretion of the applicable Vice President. Vice Presidents will set expectations within their portfolio regarding essential travel within the province. Vice Presidents will assess requests based on established criteria.

Health and Travel benefits in regards to COVID-19:

For the most current information on your health and travel benefits related to COVID-19, please visit <https://www.ab.bluecross.ca/news/covid-19-updates.php> or call Alberta Blue Cross directly at 1-800-661-6995.

How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting vacation requests and approvals?

AHS staff and leaders have demonstrated hard work and commitment throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Preparing for and responding to COVID-19 and other high priority initiatives has in some cases impacted the number of employees who can be approved off for vacation in accordance with normal operational requirements.

Vacation time approved through the Vacation Planner process for the 2020-2021 vacation year has been confirmed and posted.

Ad hoc requests for new or rescheduled vacation time should be considered on a first-come, first serve basis as operationally feasible at the time of the request. Blanket denial of vacation requests or blackout periods for in-scope employees are subject to being overturned through the grievance and arbitration process.

If the requirements of work change due to the status of COVID-19, or a requirement to reduce backlogs resulting from COVID-19, these factors should be considered at the time of the manager's assessment. If additional resources become required at a later time, AHS continues to have the ability to cancel previously approved vacation or deny ad hoc vacation requests if required.

Part of our new normal, at least for the next few months or years, will be that more vacations are spent at home (i.e. "staycations"). As such, inability to travel, on its own, is unlikely to be considered a circumstance warranting approval to change pre-approved vacation time.

If employees are requesting changes to their pre-approved vacation time, consideration should be given to the operational impact of the request and should only be approved if there are extenuating circumstances. AHS is not responsible for non-refundable costs incurred for employee-initiated vacation rescheduling requests. Note: Changing an employee's vacation does not re-open the annual vacation planning process.

In order to avoid increasing vacation liability for AHS, it is not recommended that requests to cancel vacation be granted. It is recommended that, where operationally feasible, vacation be rescheduled rather than cancelled.

As AHS moves into the next phase of pandemic response, leaders are encouraged to minimize changes to pre-approved vacation time and consider approving new requests where operationally feasible. This approach supports the health and wellness of AHS employees, ensures that annual vacation time is taken as required by policy and the collective agreements, and reduces financial liability for AHS.

How do self-isolation requirements factor into decisions about vacation time?

When an employee requests vacation, it is not appropriate to ask the employee where they will be spending their vacation. However, it is appropriate to remind the employee of their obligation to ensure that they have approval for all time away from the workplace, including any required self-isolation period, if the employee is planning non-essential international travel. It is recommended that this inquiry be made consistently to all employees (both unionized and NUEE's) requesting ad hoc vacation during the period where post international travel requires self-isolation, so that the question is demonstrably fair and reasonable and not discriminatory.

During discussions and decisions about vacation, it will be important for leaders to apply and explain the Guidelines for Essential and Non-Essential International Travel, listed above. These guidelines should also be used when managers receive requests for additional time off to occur subsequent to previously approved vacation periods, in order to cover required self-isolation following international travel.

Can managers cancel pre-approved vacations due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Due to AHS' COVID-19 response requirements and potential resource pressures, there may be circumstances that require AHS to cancel scheduled and approved vacation. Cancellation of preapproved vacations can only be done in extenuating/emergency circumstances.

Cancelling all or a portion of an employee's approved vacation will be considered only after exhausting all other options and opportunities to replace a shift(s) and as necessary to ensure operational and service continuity. Each collective agreement has provisions stating requirements and penalties for vacation cancellation by the Employer.

Vacation cancellation for non-union employees should be treated in accordance with the [NUEE Terms & Conditions of Employment](#) and the [AHS Vacation Policy](#). Contact your [HRBP Advisor](#) for further information.

Below are some guidelines and considerations for managers if they are cancelling or amending preapproved vacations.

- Cancelling all or a portion of an employee's approved vacation will be considered only after exhausting all other options and opportunities to replace a shift(s), and as necessary to ensure operational and service continuity.
- Unionized employees will be entitled to compensation in accordance with their Collective Agreement.
- Unionized and non-union employees will be entitled to reimbursement of non-refundable costs related to the cancellation of the vacation and restoration of unused vacation days to the employee's vacation bank.
- Any expenses related to cancelling the employee's vacation are to be tracked so they can be assigned to COVID-19 financial tracking process.
- At the time of the discussion, the manager and employee may discuss alternate vacation arrangements. The employee will submit a new request for vacation to be taken at a later date for the manager's approval.
- When considering whether to cancel an employee's vacation to meet operational needs, the manager should consider all factors, including but not limited to the following:

- Have all efforts been exhausted internally to identify alternate staffing and the manager can demonstrate this is a last resort? (e.g. casual, part-time, temporary staff and overtime would be considered prior to cancelling vacation).
- Are there any employees who may volunteer to reschedule their vacation?
- Is there an indication that the employee may have flexibility to amend their scheduled vacation time?
- Would cancelling the vacation cause the employee emotional distress and/or financial hardship?
- Assessment of the costs to AHS if cancellation results in necessity to reimburse the employee any non-refundable expenses.
- Depending on the length of vacation time planned, is it possible to cancel only a portion of the time off?
- Would this be an appropriate option as opposed to cancelling the entire vacation period?

In light of travel advisories and self-isolation requirements it is anticipated that some employees may ask whether they should cancel their travel plans. AHS will not be advising employees on personal decisions related to changing travel plans, however, managers should direct employees to the travel information provided by the [Government of Alberta](#).

Can vacation be paid out instead of taken?

Vacation Leave is a legislated and Collective Agreement requirement. It also plays a significant role in employees' well-being. Annual vacation leave should be taken, and can only be paid out under limited and exceptional circumstances and as per the applicable collective agreement or [AHS Vacation Carry Over and Payout Directive](#).

Additional Questions?

The information in these International Travel & Vacation Guidelines is a companion to the [Vacation Toolkit](#). Refer there for additional questions, and contact your [HRBP Advisor](#) for additional support.