April 9, 2020

OFFICIAL STATEMENT FROM SPEECH-LANGUAGE & AUDIOLOGY CANADA (SAC)

Official Statement on Speech-Language Pathology Services in Healthcare Settings during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) and communication health assistants working in healthcare settings need access to appropriate personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus that infects the mucosa of the upper airway, with the viral load likely being greatest in the mucosa of the nasal cavities, nasopharynx, oropharynx and oral cavity. Current evidence suggests that human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 occurs through contact with respiratory droplets generated by coughing and sneezing, infected secretions (such as saliva and sputum) and contaminated surfaces.

A number of speech-language pathology procedures undertaken in healthcare settings involve contact with the mucous membranes of the upper airway, as well as exposure to body fluids such as saliva and respiratory droplets. In addition, some speech-language pathology procedures may trigger release of airborne particles (aerosols) including nasoendoscopic evaluations of voice and swallowing, as well as laryngectomy and tracheostomy management. Clinical swallowing assessments, oral mechanism assessments, videofluoroscopic swallow studies and dysphagia rehabilitation also have the potential to be aerosol generating (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2020; Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists, 2020; Speech Pathology Australia, 2020).

S-LPs and communication health assistants should follow infection prevention and control strategies when providing services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The application of routine practices and additional precautions is based on a point-of-care risk assessment. S-LPs should conduct a risk assessment before and during each patient interaction to ensure the appropriate selection and use of personal protective equipment (PPE). S-LPs and communication health assistants should apply contact and droplet precautions with individuals with signs, symptoms and/or exposure criteria consistent with COVID-19.

S-LPs and communication health assistants must be able to access appropriate PPE. In the context of national concern about the availability of PPE for healthcare workers, S-LPs and communication health assistants may also refer to additional guidance about the provision of PPE issued by their provincial/territorial governments. It is important that S-LPs and communication health assistants have the ability to make decisions to protect their health and safety, as well as that of their patients.

References


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*This SAC Official Statement has been developed based on the best available evidence in the context of a rapidly evolving health care emergency and is subject to change as additional information becomes available.*

About SAC

**Speech-Language & Audiology Canada (SAC)** is a member-driven organization that supports and promotes the professions of more than 6,500 members and associates. We are the only national organization passionately supporting and representing speech-language pathologists, audiologists and communication health assistants inclusively. Through this support, we champion the needs of people with communication disorders. Visit [www.sac-oac.ca](http://www.sac-oac.ca) to learn more.

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