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

Official Statement on Speech-Language Pathology Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) infects both the upper and lower respiratory tracts, with active virus replication thought to occur in the upper respiratory tract tissues (Wölfel et al., 2020). 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. Scientists are debating the possibility of airborne transmission of COVID-19.

S-LPs and communication health assistants work in close proximity to their patients and clients. A number of procedures 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 generate aerosols through the triggering of the cough reflex (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2020; Bolton, Mills, Wallace & Brady, 2020; Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists, 2020; Speech Pathology Australia, 2020).

S-LPs and communication health assistants should follow infection prevention and control practices appropriate for the setting (e.g., acute care, community, home care and long-term-care) and their patients and clients 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 and communication health assistants should conduct a point-of-care risk assessment before and during each patient interaction to inform appropriate actions and/or selection and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) to minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Contact and droplet precautions should be used with individuals with signs, symptoms and/or exposure criteria consistent with COVID-19. Additional precautions are required for aerosol-generating medical procedures (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020). As well, clinical practice guidelines are now available to inform the conduct of speech-language pathology procedures that may generate aerosols during the COVID-19 pandemic (for example, Canadian Society of Otolaryngology – Head and
Neck Surgery, 2020 a, b; Kho et al., 2020; Ku et al., 2020; Mattei et al., 2020; Soldatova et al., 2020; Zaga et al., 2020).

S-LPs and communication health assistants must be able to access appropriate PPE. S-LPs and communication health assistants should also refer to guidance about infection prevention and control practices issued by their provincial regulatory body, and/or 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 and clients.

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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