

October 22, 2020

Nova Scotia Health continues to make significant progress completing and rebooking surgeries, exams and procedures that were impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the great work of staff and physicians across the province. This update provides information on our efforts to increase access to surgery, endoscopy, diagnostic imaging services, outpatient laboratory services and other outpatient services.

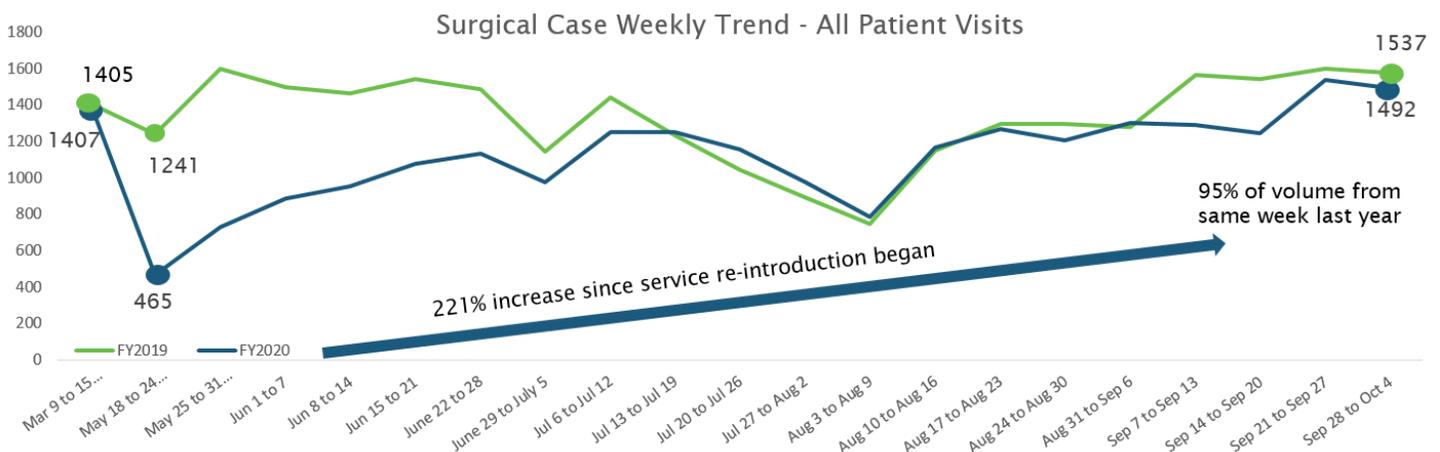
## Surgery and Endoscopy Services

Our teams have been working to prioritize cases and coordinate resources so that as many patients as possible can get the surgery and endoscopies they need. Where possible, we have made adjustments to how we deliver and schedule services to allow for more cases to be completed, while maintaining COVID-19 precautions.

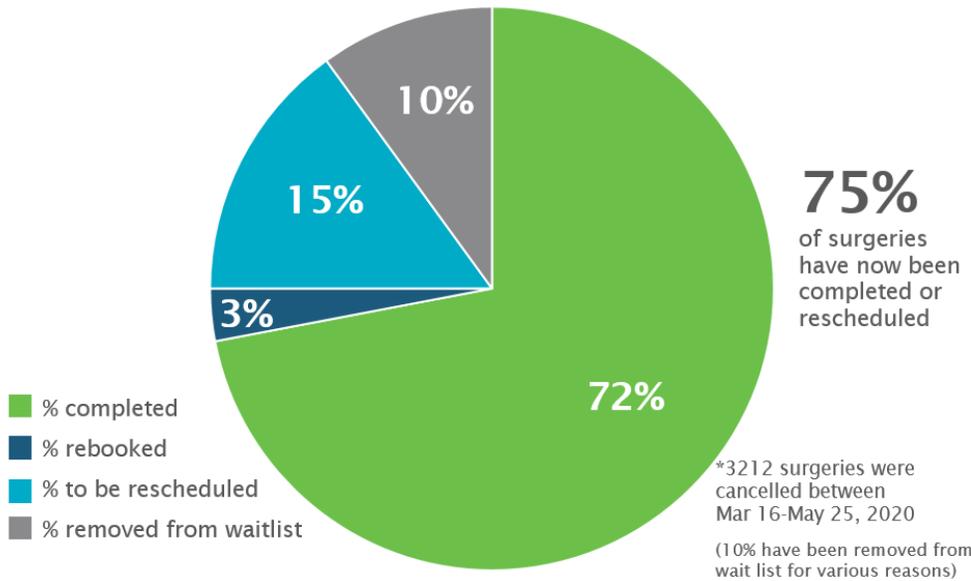
Since May 25 we have made steady progress rebooking those patients who had their scheduled surgeries cancelled. Many other surgeries would normally have occurred between March 16 and May 25, but had not yet been scheduled when service changes came into effect. Also, the overall number of patients currently waiting for surgery does not reflect anticipated demand, as during COVID-19 fewer patients visited primary care providers or saw surgeons to assess their need for surgery. As such, fewer patients were referred to surgical specialists and added to surgical wait lists.

### Surgical volumes

- May 18-24 (before service reintroduction), 465 surgeries (**37% of cases** same week in 2019)
- As of October 4, volumes were **up 221%** from the week before service reintroduction began
- Sept 28 - Oct 4, volumes were at 1492 (**95%** of volume during same week in 2019)



## Progress Completing/Rebooking Surgeries Cancelled During COVID-19 Slowdown\* (Updated October 19, 2020)

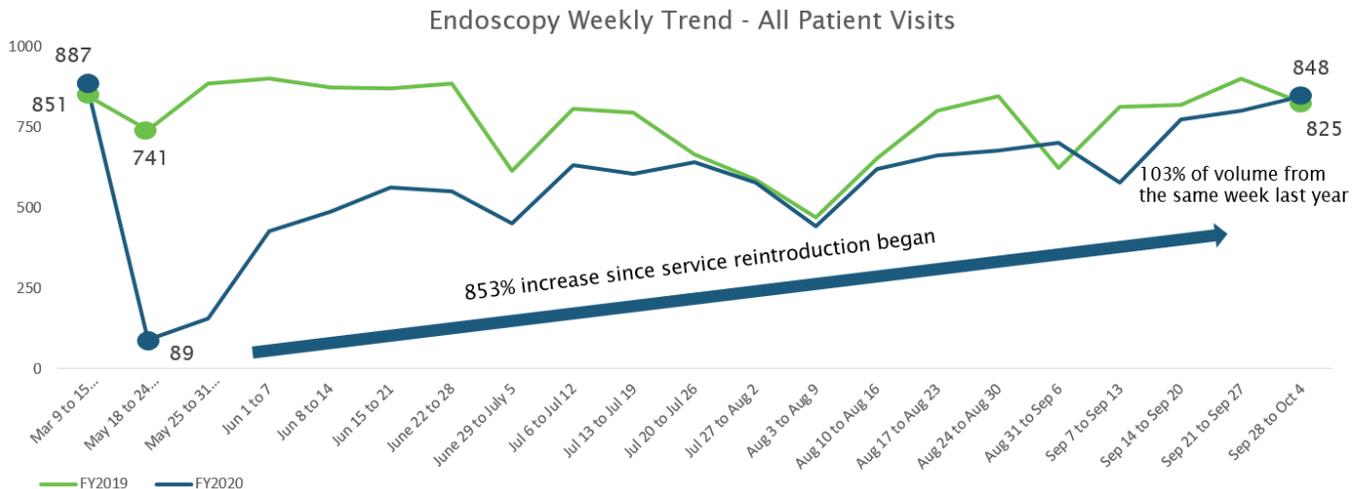


This chart reflects progress rebooking or completing scheduled surgeries that were postponed.

*Data excludes endoscopies. Total numbers may fluctuate between reporting periods due to ongoing data entry/quality control efforts.*

## Endoscopy volumes

- May 18–24 (before service reintroduction), 89 endoscopies were completed (12% of cases same week in 2019)
- Sept 28 – Oct 4, 848 endoscopies completed (103% of cases the same week in 2019), an **increase of 853%** since service reintroduction began

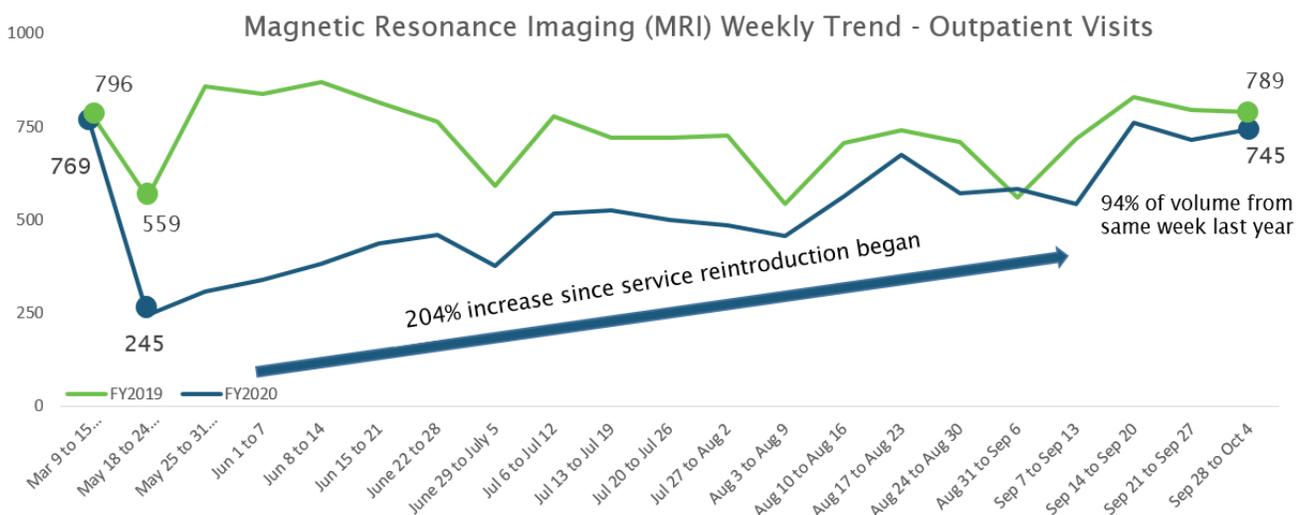
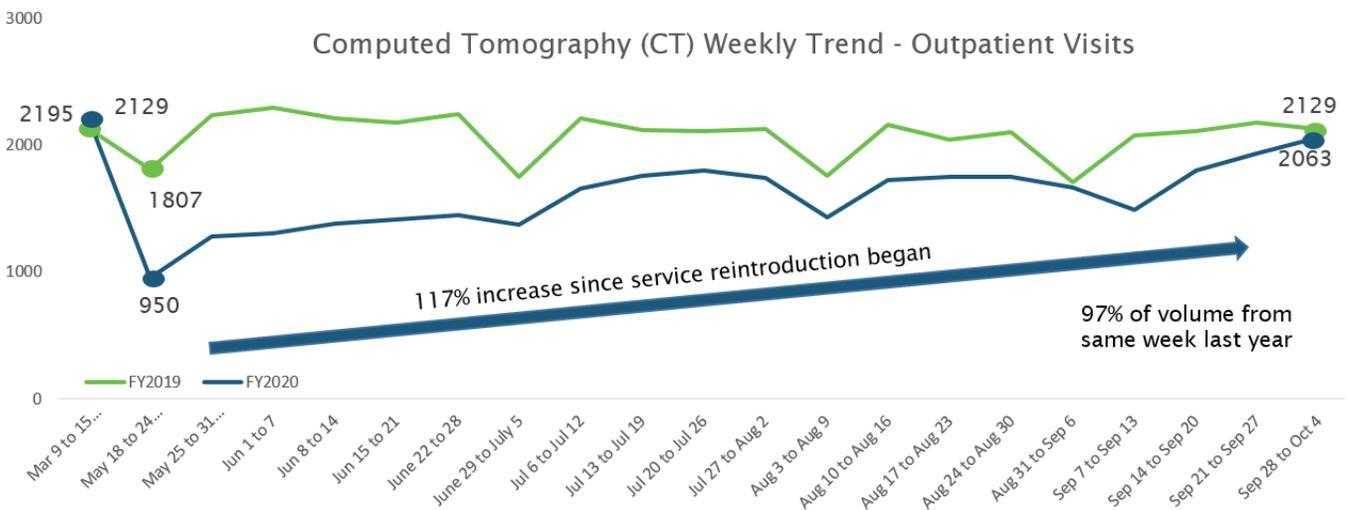


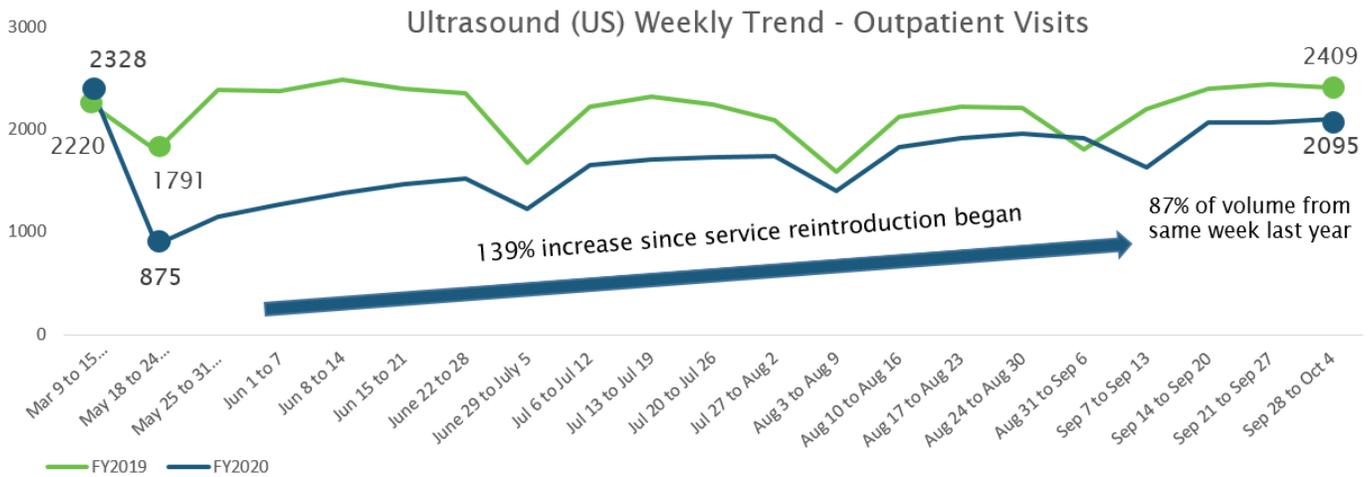
## Diagnostic Imaging (DI) Exams

Outpatient emergency and urgent exams are being completed and work is ongoing to complete semi-urgent exams. A limited number of elective exams are being completed. Online booking for X-rays is available at some sites by visiting <https://booking.nshealth.ca>. You can visit [www.nshealth.ca/diagnostic-imaging](http://www.nshealth.ca/diagnostic-imaging) for a list of locations and contact information for these services. The public is reminded to let us know if they cannot make an appointment so other people can be booked. This will also limit the number of no shows.

### Diagnostic Imaging volumes

- Between Sept 28 – Oct 4:
  - 2063 CTs (117% more than May 25, 97% of volume same week in 2019)
  - 745 MRIs (204% more than May 25, 94% of volume same week in 2019)
  - 2,095 USs (139% more than May 25, 87% of volume same week in 2019)



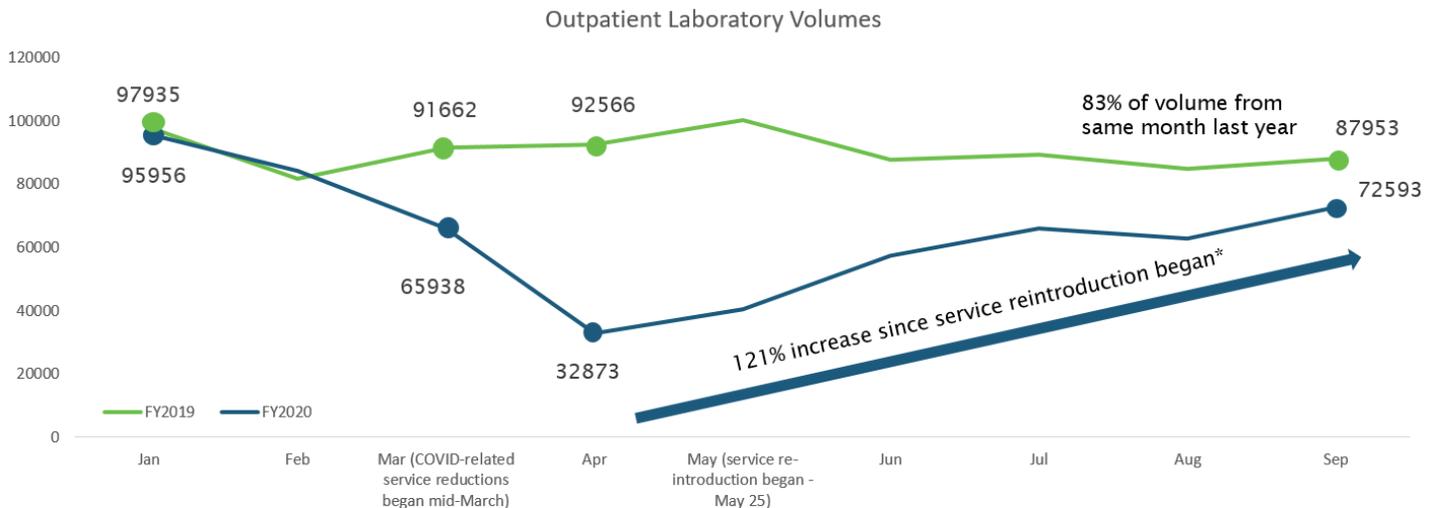


## Outpatient Laboratory Services

Lab services covers various blood, urine and fecal tests needed to diagnose, treat and manage various health issues and conditions. All outpatient emergency and urgent tests are being completed by appointment only across all sites. Online booking continues to be implemented at more than 60 sites across the province and is now available for blood collection at 29 sites. Appointments can be made by visiting <https://booking.nshealth.ca>. For a full list of blood collection locations and booking information you can visit <http://www.nshealth.ca/blood-collection>. Significant laboratory resources continue to be directed at testing for COVID-19 and testing volume is not reflected in this information.

### Outpatient Laboratory volumes

- During the month of September there were 72,593 outpatient laboratory visits/procedures completed:
  - up 121% since service reintroduction began on May 25
  - 83% of volumes during September 2019



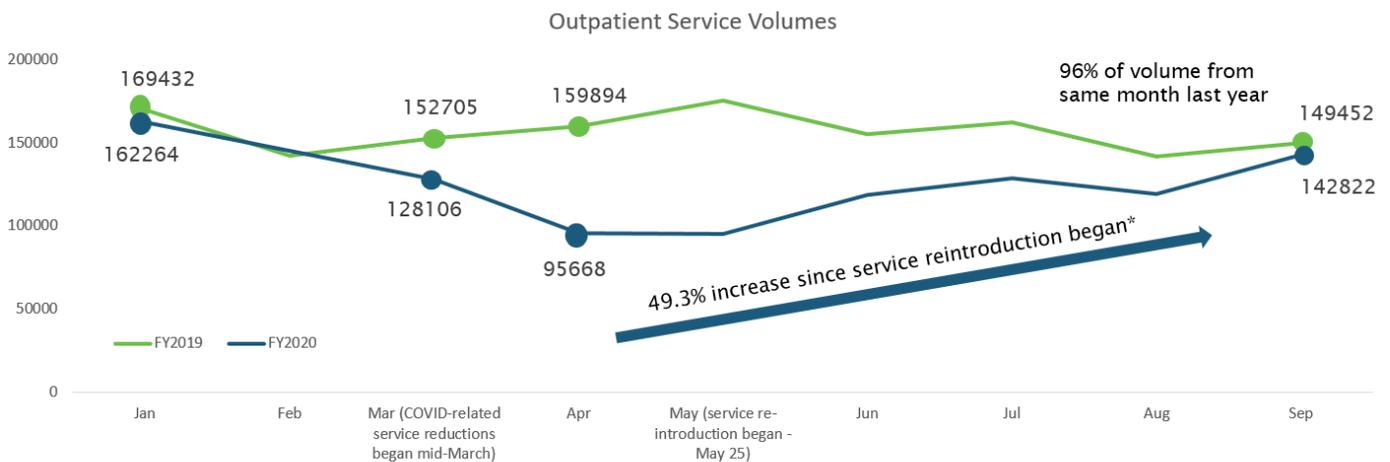
\*Compared to full month of April, 2020

## Outpatient Services

Outpatient or ambulatory services provide various types of care including IV therapies, wound care/dressing changes, blood transfusions, and physician special clinics such as ear, nose and throat (ENT), dermatology and ophthalmology. The number of in-person appointments are increasing with physical distance in mind. Virtual appointments are also used where appropriate.

### Outpatient Service volumes

- In September there were 142,822 outpatient visits/procedures:
  - Up **49.3%** since service reintroduction began on May 25
  - **96% of volumes** in September 2019



\*Compared to full month of April, 2020

## Primary Care

Nova Scotia Health reminds the public that primary care providers continue to deliver health care during the pandemic, either virtually or in-person if needed care. People should continue to call their family practice as they normally would for health advice and the care they need.

When patients need an in-person appointment, this is done in a safe environment, as family practices follow guidelines to protect patients and themselves from the spread of COVID-19.

We offer a variety of online wellness sessions that people can participate in free of charge. There are sessions about healthy eating, physical activity, mental wellness, parenting, and managing one's risk factors for ongoing health conditions. These free sessions offered by health professionals are a great way to learn new information and strategies for staying healthy and well. View a complete list of available sessions at [HealthyNovaScotia.ca](https://HealthyNovaScotia.ca)



## Cancer Care

Most cancer patients continued to receive treatment while Nova Scotia Health managed through the COVID-19 pandemic.

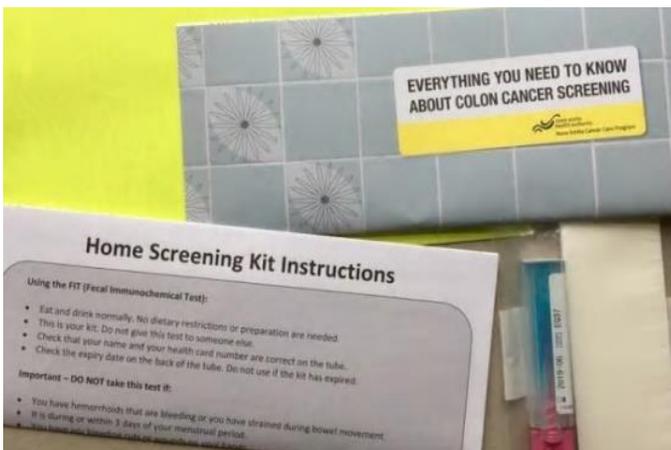
Out-patient services in medical, radiation, and gynecologic oncology, as well as hematology, including chemotherapy and radiation therapy, continued, using telephone and video appointment whenever appropriate.

### Cancer Screening programs

Nova Scotia Health continues to operate the Cervical Cancer Prevention Program and the Colon Cancer Prevention Program. Cancer screening, in general, is about looking for cancer or pre-cancer before there are warning signs or symptoms.

Anyone with any kind of worrying symptoms should not be waiting for a screening test. They should speak with a health care provider.

- **Cervical Cancer Screening**, which was temporarily suspended in March, resumed across the Province in June.
- **The Colon Cancer Screening** program resumed on October 14, with automatic mail outs of colon cancer test home screening kits to Nova Scotians, who are between 50 and 74 and are registered with MSI.



Mail outs were suspended the middle of March when provincial endoscopy services were limited to emergency colonoscopies only as a result of COVID-19. However, the lab continued to process any home screening kits it received.

Colonoscopies resumed the end of May, but there was a backlog of 1,600 Nova Scotians waiting for a screening program colonoscopy which needed to be addressed.

Cancer Care Program leaders worked with the provincial endoscopy team to address the backlog and Nova Scotians who were waiting for a program screening colonoscopy have now either had one or have an appointment for one.

Nova Scotians, who were due to receive a kit between March and September when the program was suspended, and are interested in completing a home screening kit, are asked to call 1-866-599-2267. More information is available [here](#).

## Mental Health and Addictions

We have an important role in the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver a continuum of mental health and addictions services including outpatient, crisis and inpatient care to meet people’s needs. We are committed to service excellence – with patient, staff and physician safety being the top priority.

### How did we improve access during COVID-19? (Mar 22 to Sept 30)

- Accelerated launch of e-Mental Health and Addictions
- Introduced innovative online services and virtual care options
- Launched our new website for mental health and addictions ([mha.nshealth.ca](http://mha.nshealth.ca)), providing Nova Scotians with easy access to information.
- Offered 14,059 crisis interventions through Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line (32% more than last year during the same time).
- Met with 29,974 individuals 154,885 times of which over 55,700 visits were delivered face to face and 64% (99,109 visits) were by phone and virtual care platforms to support their recovery and wellbeing.
- Supported recovery of people living with harmful substance use in 16,711 Opioid Disorder Treatment Program visits



## Service Reintroduction Challenges

Nova Scotia Health acknowledges that while progress is being made to improve access to key health services, we also face a number of challenges that are impacting these efforts.

- High inpatient occupancy rates which have an impact on our ability to increase the number of surgeries, for instance. While we need to maintain some inpatient beds to ensure we can respond to any surge in COVID-19 activity, our inpatient occupancy rates were historically high and continue to increase as we treat sick patients.
  
- We remain limited in our ability to transfer appropriate patients to long-term care facilities, which are limiting access to their beds as a part of their COVID-19 responses. Work is underway to increase capacity in long-term care:
  - Since June, 23 new nursing home level beds have opened in Central Zone.
  - Work continues to open more nursing home beds that were closed during the initial phase of the pandemic.
  - More than 30 residential care facility level beds in nursing homes are being converted to nursing home level beds and more are being considered.
  
- We need to maintain public health measures including access control and physical distancing, which is an issue in many hospitals and health centres where space may be limited. This impacts the number of people we can have in some areas at a time, such as clinics and waiting rooms. As a result, we continue to run many services below our normal levels.

## Visitor Restrictions

Visitor restrictions at Nova Scotia Health facilities help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Effective **September 17**, the following exceptions to the visitor restrictions are in place:

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**Two support people for:**



- all hospital inpatients
- palliative care patients approaching end of life
- patients receiving medical assistance in dying (MAID)
- patients in labour and giving birth
- children in outpatient and emergency settings

\*Additional family members may be permitted for those approaching end-of-life in discussion with the care team

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**One support person for:**



- patients arriving for cancer care, emergency, outpatient and ambulatory care clinics, appointments or procedures

Please note: Some areas may not be able to accommodate additional support people due to the need to maintain physical distancing requirements. In these cases, care teams will work with families to discuss options.

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If you have questions about these exceptions please talk to your care team.

If you feel unwell or have felt unwell in the past 48 hours (fever/chills/sweats, new or worsening cough or a combination of sore throat, runny nose, headache or shortness of breath), are supposed to be self-isolating due to travel, or are waiting for results of COVID-19 test results, please do not visit.



As of Sept. 17, [visitor restrictions have been updated](#). Some patients may be able to have one or two support persons with them, if space permits.

While some patients may now be able to have a support person attend appointments with them, this is not possible at all locations, as it would result in fewer patients receiving care. In these cases, care teams will work with families to discuss options.

## Preparing for a Second Wave

Nova Scotia Health is using its experience of the first wave of COVID-19 to develop its plans for a potential second wave. With the goal to minimize the amount of disruption of ongoing services, plans will balance the needs of people who require hospitalization due to COVID-19 with the health care needs of all Nova Scotians. With that approach, should there be increased COVID-19 activity in certain areas that would require other health services to be slowed or stopped, other areas can continue to provide services if COVID-19 activity remains low.

Additionally, Nova Scotia Health is working with the Department of Health and Wellness and the continuing care sector on a plan to provide improved support for residents and staff in the event of a second wave. This includes:

- Increased funding for and access to critical staff and other resources such as occupational health and safety (OHS), infection prevention and control experts and long-term care assistants.
- Supporting the quality of life for residents by permitting volunteers and designated care givers to support physical care and mental well-being of residents.
- Supporting the mental health and well-being for long-term care staff.
- Establishing Regional Care Units to provide centralized care for COVID-19 positive long-term care residents

## About Nova Scotia Health Authority

Nova Scotia Health provides health services to Nova Scotians and a wide array of specialized services to Maritimers and Atlantic Canadians. Nova Scotia Health operates hospitals, health centres and community-based programs across the province. Our team of health professionals includes employees, doctors, researchers, learners and volunteers. We work in partnership with community groups, schools, governments, foundations and auxiliaries and community health boards. Visit [nshealth.ca](https://nshealth.ca) for more information.