

# Availability and Coverage: Standards for Nurse Practitioners

*(Not in effect until approved)*

## Purpose

This standard ensures that nurse practitioners (NPs) provide continuous care by arranging coverage for **after-hours** needs, communicating effectively with patients and health-care providers, and managing diagnostic results and specialist referrals in a **timely manner**. NPs must establish a **communication plan** for when they are unavailable and enter formal agreements with **covering health-care providers** to manage patient care during **temporary absences**.

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## Criteria

To meet this standard, NPs must

1. Ensure continuous patient care by:
    - 1.1. Directly providing or arranging coverage for patients' after-hours needs through appropriate health-care provider or **services**.
    - 1.2. Responding when contacted by other health-care providers in a timely manner regarding patient care.
    - 1.3. Regularly monitoring and responding to voicemails and electronic messages, prioritizing patient safety when determining response times.
  2. Establish a communication plan when unavailable that includes:

After-hours covering provider contact information.

    - 2.1. Patient instructions for accessing after-hours, urgent or emergency care.
    - 2.2. How covering providers or services can request and share patient information as needed.
  3. Ensure systems are in place to manage after-hours diagnostic tests and specialist referrals by:
    - 3.1. Taking responsibility for reviewing and acting on diagnostic test results and specialist consultation reports.
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- 3.2. Receiving and reviewing **critical diagnostic test results** and patient follow-up, in a timely manner.
  4. Ensuring diagnostic tests and specialist referrals are labeled with the ordering provider's contact information, with clear processes outlined for locum coverage if applicable.
  5. Assigning patient care to a covering health-care provider by mutual agreement.
  6. Establish agreements with covering providers or services to manage patient care during planned and unplanned absences, ensuring:
    - 6.1. Handover at the start and end of the coverage period.
    - 6.2. Procedures for managing outstanding diagnostic tests, results (including critical results), specialist referrals and consultation reports, including any required follow-up care.
    - 6.3. Sharing of patient information with other health-care providers in a timely manner.

## Glossary

**COMMUNICATION PLAN** – A plan that includes publicly accessible information on how patients and health-care providers can reach the NP when they are unavailable. This information should be publicly posted, such as on a website or voicemail, so that patients and providers know who is covering for the NP during their absence.

**AFTER HOURS** – Patient care outside of regular clinic or office operating hours.

**[Appropriate] SERVICE** – For the purposes of this standard, “service” includes, but is not limited to, Health Link, an emergency service, after-hours medical clinics. Evidence of an agreement with an appropriate service is required.

**COVERING HEALTH-CARE PROVIDER** – A registered NP or physician. Coverage cannot be delegated to a non-NP or non-physician.

**CRITICAL DIAGNOSTIC TEST RESULTS** – Results that are serious and may require immediate decisions about patient care.

**TEMPORARY ABSENCE** – A short-term absence from practice for planned reasons, such as vacations or leaves of absence (e.g., parental or educational leave), as well as unplanned absences such as illness or family emergencies.

**TIMELY MANNER** – A time frame that matches the urgency of the situation.

## **Acknowledgements**

The College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA) acknowledges the valuable contributions of other Canadian nursing, physician and regulated health profession colleges in the development of this document. The CRNA recognizes the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta for their expertise and collaborative efforts. The insights and practices shared by these organizations have helped shape this standard.

