

COVID-19 surge may be plateauing, says Medical Officer of Health

As Aurora sees its 49th and 50th residents lost to COVID-19, there may be signs the latest wave of the virus is reaching a plateau.

With COVID-19 testing at a premium, the Region of York is looking to wastewater to measure to assess the intensity of the latest wave, according to Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health.

"We're beginning this week with some hopeful indications that our efforts at vaccination and Public Health measures are succeeding," said Dr. Pakes on Monday. "One of the measures we're now using to assess the intensity of COVID-19 in our Region are COVID-19 signals in wastewater. The most recent wastewater signals suggest we may be reaching a plateau of cases. This finding agrees with our forward-looking models that show our COVID-19 cases peaking this week or next. While we continue to face challenging times, we can be assured our hard work and sacrifices are bearing fruit."

Signs that the latest wave might be reaching a plateau comes as the community mourns two more residents lost to COVID-19, bringing the confirmed local death toll to 50.

A 94-year-old man, a resident of Chartwell Aurora (formerly Resthaven), lost his battle with COVID on January 7, the Region confirmed on Friday afternoon. An asymptomatic case, he first tested positive for the virus on January 4.

The 50th victim, announced by York Region Public Health on Monday, was a 95-year-old female. Having tested positive on January 8 after first experiencing symptoms the same day, she died at Richmond Hill's Mackenzie Health Hospital on Tuesday, January 11.

RETURN TO SCHOOLS

Students across York Region are slated to return to in-person learning this week following the Sunday night snow storm that delayed the previously-scheduled return on January 17.

The return to schools was heralded by Dr. Pakes as a "good news story."

"As we have seen over the past weeks, there is a broad consensus among public health practitioners, healthcare community members, and politicians that a return to in-person learning is in the best interest of the mental, social and physical wellbeing of our children," he said. "School is the best place for children right now. That said, the return to school may be worrisome for some parents."

"New Provincial guidelines means that cases will no longer be reported in schools and cohorts will not be dismissed. Parents are understandably concerned. However, new Provincial screening guidance as well as the distribution of further rapid tests for symptomatic children will keep COVID-19 outside of schools to the extent possible. The most important thing families can do to protect their children and themselves is to get vaccinated. While the risk of severe illness due to COVID-19 is low in children, the risk is much, much lower in vaccinated children."

More than half of York Region children between the ages of five and 11 had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by the start of this week, with 90 per cent of youth in the higher age bracket of 12 to 17 receiving theirs.

The Region hopes that at least 10 per cent of kids in the younger age demographic will receive their second doses by the end of this week.

"For many York Region children who had their first dose in late November or early December, the eight-week interval is quickly approaching," said Dr. Pakes. "Parents may also choose a reduced interval. To have your children fully vaccinated sooner, you can get your child's second dose as early as 21 days after the first by providing informed consent at one of our clinics. As a reminder,

children and anyone who is still in need of their first or second dose can walk into any of our York Region clinics to book a vaccine.

If you're an adult who is yet to receive your first, second or booster dose, now is the time. With the changes in testing eligibility and a restriction to high-risk settings or healthcare workers and others, our reported cases are only a fraction of actual cases.

Unfortunately, the number of hospitalized patients in Ontario has reached almost 4,000 over this weekend, closing in on almost double the peak of the third devastating wave. Two vaccine doses provide 80 per cent protection against hospitalization and 90 per cent against ICU admission using our Ontario and global data.

If you have recently had COVID-19, Dr. Pakes notes that you can receive a vaccine as soon as you're feeling better and your isolation is complete, but there is some evidence that waiting for 30 days following your last symptoms to get your next shot may provide more long-lasting protection.

However, given that many people with symptoms haven't had access to testing and will not know definitively if their symptoms are truly COVID, it may be prudent to seek vaccinations sooner rather than later, said Dr. Pakes.

LOCAL STATS

As of Monday, January 17, Aurora was grappling with 139 confirmed active cases of COVID-19, but, as York Region Public Health notes, this number is an under-estimate.

With rapid transmission of Omicron and recent provincial changes in testing eligibility and case management, case counts and outbreaks reported through the COVID-19 in York Region interactive dashboard are an under-estimate of the true number of individuals with COVID-19 and outbreaks in York Region, the Region stated, adding case counts should be treated with caution. Public Health units across Ontario are prioritizing case management of high-risk individuals and settings. Workplace outbreaks are no longer reported.

Of the confirmed active cases, 117 are attributed to local transmission, close contact or unknown exposure and 22 to institutional outbreak.

Since the start of the global pandemic, York Region Public Health has been able to confirm 3,858 cases of COVID-19 as of Monday. 3,669 cases are now marked as resolved and there have been 50 fatalities attributed to the virus.

90.9 per cent of Aurora residents aged 12 and up have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 89.6 per cent had received two doses by the start of the week.

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