

Flu trends 'very concerning' in York Region, says top doc

As the winter season approaches, current influenza trends in York Region are proving 'very concerning' for Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health.

The local health department will soon begin monitoring the situation through wastewater signals, said Dr. Pakes on Monday in the latest of his weekly updates, which were originally intended to update the community on COVID-19 but has since expanded to other respiratory illnesses like flu and RSV.

'My heart goes out to families with sick children, others who are unwell, healthcare workers and many others who are struggling to care for them,' said Dr. Pakes. 'For others, I know it can be hard to continue to hear about the pandemic, RSV (Respiratory Syncytial Virus), flu and other viruses, and our overwhelmed healthcare infrastructure and not feel how this impacts your life and wellbeing. But I am urging you to please take heart and do your best to help your loved ones and the community.'

'I hope you, like me, are constantly searching for ways to decrease the pressure on our hospitals and emergency rooms so that those who are seeking care and needing care most, including our elderly and now our young children can get the care they need.'

While hospitals are feeling the pressure of what Dr. Pakes described as 'the burden of illness,' he said COVID measures remain stable in many respects.

'Our York Region COVID Wastewater may be trending upward somewhat, but our institutional outbreaks and hospitalizations are stable. In particular, we're encouraged by the fact that some of our long-term care facilities have high COVID and influenza vaccination rates, but unfortunately other facilities lag somewhat behind. We encourage everyone in long-term care or with family there or who works there to ensure that they're protected with the bivalent vaccine and the influenza vaccine. When long-term or any congregate care setting has high vaccine coverage, not only are people not getting sick or very sick, but outbreak measures that impact mental health are not needed.'

'Our influenza trends are indeed very concerning with our trajectory already exceeding any recent influenza season in memory ' both in terms of magnitude, the height of the influenza in the community, and the timing, which is much earlier than usual. We may be seeing indications that influenza may be peaking but it will take a few more weeks to confirm this. Fortunately, this week's flu vaccine is a good match and each and every person of every age who gets the flu vaccine this season is making a difference.'

RSV, he added, is circulating at 'unprecedented levels' and is seeing the most impact in young children who are contracting severe illness.

'Our emergency rooms and inpatient paediatrics are absolutely overwhelmed with ill and severely ill children,' Dr. Pakes continued. 'Older adults may also become seriously ill with RSV but there's some good news on that front with Health Canada recently reviewing an RSV vaccine candidate for seniors. We're excited that we've partnered with researchers to look into flu and RSV wastewater monitoring, as well as the COVID wastewater monitoring we're already doing. This is an important tool for today and into the future and we look forward to bringing you updates using that data shortly.'

As the holiday season approaches, Dr. Pakes said he encourages people to 'think about those impacted by the viruses' as they consider gatherings and to 'consider wearing a mask when you're in a crowded or confined public setting.'

'When considering what else you can do this season to keep yourself and others safe, please take a moment to assess whether or not you have cold or flu symptoms before you gather,' he said. 'What may appear as a mild cold for one person can lead to a severe respiratory infection in another person, especially in those who are very young or other vulnerable groups.'

'Hopefully your family and friends will understand if you need to stay home and reschedule when you're feeling better. Of course,

before you gather, almost every York Region resident should have a bivalent COVID vaccine dose and the influenza vaccination this season.?

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