

Public Health suspends data reporting as third anniversary of COVID-19 approaches

As the third anniversary approaches of the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, York Region Public Health has announced that, as of this month, they will cease regular updates on the virus, including updating their COVID-19 dashboard.

“Since March 2020, the Region has provided regular updates to the media and the public in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; these updates provided important information about the status of COVID-19 cases in York Region and have shared details on COVID-19-related fatalities in our community, vaccination status, outbreaks and hospitalization,” said Patrick Casey, Director of Corporate Communications for the Region of York.

“As COVID-19 cases continue to trend downward and restrictions in our community have been lifted, York Region will cease regular COVID-19 updates to media partners and on social media channels, effective March 2023. Public Health will focus on managing and reporting COVID-19 data and information in alignment with other reportable infectious diseases.”

Since it was first launched in March of 2020, York Region Public Health's COVID-19 dashboard was a way for members of the public to track not only the number of cases that were circulating in the community, how many individuals were hospitalized, where they were exposed to the virus and, sadly, how many community members died with the illness.

But, as reporting changed across the Province, and rules were relaxed, the numbers on the dashboard reflected less and less the current reality.

In the last dashboard update on February 28, the Region reported 79 total confirmed deaths of Aurora residents since the start of the pandemic, with 90.7 per cent of residents aged 5+ having received two or more doses of a COVID-19 vaccine.

“It's hard to believe but we are approaching the three-year anniversary of the World Health Organizations' declaration of the COVID-19 global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Fortunately and finally it does seem that we are turning a corner,” said Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, last week.

“While the impact of COVID-19 is very much with us, and impacting acute care, our physical and mental health, and our ability to recover, things are much closer to normal than they have ever been. Our hospitalization numbers are decreasing, our wastewater burden is decreasing, and our outbreaks in facilities are lower than they have been in many years. Previously to get to these low levels of COVID-19's impact, we needed severe pandemic control measures, but this time we've achieved this with overwhelming population immunity from vaccination and several waves of very transmissible variants.

“What do we still need to do? People are still dying of COVID-19 unnecessarily and we still need to protect the most vulnerable among us from illness, as we would with any other infection. It is still important to take appropriate precautions like staying home when symptomatic, wearing a mask around vulnerable individuals and crowded spaces, and washing your hands frequently. This will minimize the risk of COVID-19 in the most vulnerable and help keep us in a good place. COVID-19 wise and relating to other infections.”

The “success of each and every person's good health,” he said, remains in a “very large part” due to vaccination, particularly the bivalent vaccine, which protects from severe illness and hospitalization. There has been “excellent uptake” with this booster amongst the over-70 population, but younger demographics are “less protected than they need to be.”

Encouraged all residents who have not yet had a booster do so, and getting the shot now will carry protections into the fall.

Attention is also shifting back to other vaccines, particularly those that were more difficult to administer at the height of the

pandemic.

“Over the last three years, health care public health and our lives have been immeasurably disrupted,” said Dr. Pakes. “These actions saved lives – tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of lives across Canada – but one of the consequences of these measures was they moved our focus away from other preventive health actions and made us vulnerable to other illnesses. One of the very important impacts of the pandemic was the disruption of our usual vaccination efforts.

“As you will know, there have been measles cases now detected in Ontario and many cases globally. Measles is a very, very infectious virus that can kill and disable children, and it is very vaccine-preventable. It was eliminated from Canada only 25 years ago and we can't allow it to return. The last thing we need now are more outbreaks and illnesses, so what we each need to do now is ensure everyone is protected through our regular vaccine schedule.”

By Brock Weir
EditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter