

Public Health urges holiday caution as vaccine eligibility expands

York Region's top doctor is urging residents to exercise caution as we enter the holidays.

Dr. Barry Pakes, the Region's Medical Officer of Health, says there's evidence that wastewater indicators for RSV and influenza, which had been increasing in recent weeks, have now plateaued.

Despite this, the "triple threat" of influenza, RSV, and, of course, COVID-19 is still present in the community and hospitals are still feeling the strain.

"Our wastewater signals for RSV and influenza, which are still in the pilot phases of how we understand them, are showing positive signs that the signal is no longer increasing. Furthermore, influenza cases have levelled off and COVID cases in hospitals and ICUs are also steady, though we are still seeing several COVID cases that are dying and any death is one too many," said Dr. Pakes in his latest community update.

"Paediatric hospitalizations in York Region are still roughly double our usual capacity but not triple and that is great news; the incredible people at the frontlines, and let's not forget those supporting those frontlines, have done heroic work. The burden on our hospitals and the circulation of these viruses is still high but we are seeing a hopeful trend and one we predicted and expected at this point in the season. The challenge is maintaining this trend during a season when we all want and need to get together, socialize, and see family and friends."

Making it through the holidays and winter "healthier together" will take some effort, he said, adding "it's never too late to protect yourself and your loved ones." He encouraged residents, if they haven't done so already, to get the bivalent COVID-19 vaccines approved from either Moderna or Pfizer, as well as the annual flu shot.

"Even if you don't normally get the flu vaccine every year, this year it is worth your while as influenza has truly been affecting young and old and everyone in between and this year's vaccine offers excellent protection," said Dr. Pakes.

The push for further vaccines comes as all Ontarians aged 5 and older become eligible for the bivalent vaccines.

The Ministry of Health announced last week that this younger age bracket would become eligible for the latest booster effective Wednesday, December 21.

"As the weather gets colder and more people spend time with their loved ones indoors this holiday season, vaccination remains the most effective way we can protect ourselves from the most serious effects of COVID-19 and influenza," said Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health. "Vaccines provide strong protection against severe illness from COVID-19 and its variants and will help ease pressures on our hospitals and emergency departments."

A COVID-19 bivalent booster targets the original COVID-19 virus and provides better protection against the other variants currently circulating. Flu shots can also be safely given at the same time, or at any time before or after a COVID-19 vaccine for individuals aged six months and older.

"Of course, there are still other things you can do to protect yourself and loved ones this holiday season; wearing a mask is strongly recommended in indoor public settings and crowded indoor environments," said Dr. Pakes. "This is particularly important if you have a cold or flu-like illness and may need to be in a public space. A mild cold from one person can develop into a severe respiratory infection for someone else. Wearing a mask protects both you and those more vulnerable and in our community. Free COVID-19 rapid antigen tests continue to be available. Help keep our emergency departments focused on the most severely ill, but do see a healthcare provider if you need to. If you have any non-serious symptoms and are looking to see a healthcare provider and are unable to see your family doctor or don't have one, there are a number of COVID-19 cold and flu clinics to help you.

?With many holiday gatherings around the corner, please monitor yourself and your loved ones for symptoms and stay home while you're sick. Your family and friends will hopefully understand if you need to miss an event or postpone a holiday event to help keep everyone as healthy and safe as possible and enjoying each other's company when it is safe. Enjoy the holiday season as best you can while looking out for one another.?

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