

## Booster eligibility expands as first Omicron case is identified in York Region

Beginning this Monday, December 13, Ontario residents aged 50 and over will be eligible to receive a COVID-19 booster.

The Province announced the expansion to the program on Thursday amid continued fears over the Omicron variant. Further expansion of the booster program is expected in January, the Ministry of Health noted.

"If you are eligible for a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, please book your appointment as soon as you can to provide yourself an extra layer of protection," said Dr. Kieran Moore, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. "If you have not yet received the vaccine, please do so today. This includes vaccinations for children aged five to 11. Achieving the highest vaccination rates possible remains our best tool to protect us, reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, and fight the significant surge of new cases and the new Omicron variant."

The first case of the Omicron variant within York Region was announced by York Region Public Health on Friday. The case was identified in a youth under the age of 12, who resides in Vaughan. It is a travel-related case from the "southern African region," said Patrick Casey, Director of Corporate Communications for the Region.

The resident returned to Canada on November 22 and has been isolating at home since.

"This case and their household members are isolating at home and there is no known risk to York Region residents," said Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, in his weekly update on Monday. "We work closely with our Public Health Ontario partners and others to quickly identify cases of Omicron and our case and contact team ensures that enhanced case and contact management is conducted quickly to prevent further transmission. There is no known Omicron transmission in Ontario outside of travel-related cases at this time.

"We can expect to see more Omicron cases across York Region, Ontario and Canada over the coming days and weeks, but while there is some evidence that the Omicron variant is more transmissible than the Delta variant, there is also emerging evidence that the mRNA vaccines used in Ontario are still very effective for Omicron. We continue to learn more about this every day."

The more immediate concern, said Dr. Pakes, is the "significant rise in cases" across Ontario.

"Fortunately, our best protection against COVID-19 and the variants of concern remains vaccination," he continued, highlighting the uptake in youth vaccinations since the Province approved doses for kids between the ages of five and 11. "I am pleased so many children have taken this opportunity to better protect themselves and everybody around them. Over 15 per cent of the 91,000 children in York Region have already been vaccinated with their first dose and we're aiming for it to be as high as possible [before the New Year].

"With holiday gatherings approaching and cases rising amongst children, getting vaccinated is the best way to ensure a safe, in-person return to school in January. Once your children are fully vaccinated, they won't have to quarantine if they are exposed to a case in school or extra-curricular activities. The sooner your children get the first dose, the sooner your children can get the second dose and be fully vaccinated."

The booster, he added, is an "added layer of protection" to prevent waning immunity, a phenomenon already identified in other countries, particularly in Europe.

By Tuesday, December 7, Aurora had seen a total of 2,124 confirmed cases of COVID-19 since the start of the global pandemic. 2,054 cases are now marked as recovered and 48 fatalities have been attributed to the virus.

Of the 22 active cases, 17 are attributed to local transmission, close contact or unknown exposure, 3 to travel, and 2 to school

settings.

90.9 per cent of Aurora residents had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by December 6, while the number of eligible residents with two doses stands at 89.2 per cent.

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter