

Booster limits in York Region is 'ethical imperative,' says Medical Officer of Health

On Monday, Ontarians over the age of 18 who received their second dose of a COVID-19 vaccine at least three months ago became eligible to receive a booster – but, here in York Region, boosters for this age bracket were largely only available in local pharmacies and primary health care offices.

York Region Public Health began the week by lowering the eligibility threshold from six months from your last shot to three months, but held firm on limiting booster eligibility to those 50+ at most of their publicly-run clinics.

Doing so is an 'ethical imperative,' said Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, while doses were in limited supply.

'Although we have been predicting and expecting this dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases, it is still very difficult to see case numbers increasing so rapidly,' said Dr. Pakes in Monday. 'We have shifted gears very quickly, changing how we test for COVID, how we follow up cases, dramatically increasing our vaccination capacity and changing the rules on how we gather in Ontario.'

As the Omicron variant was, he said, 'more transmissible than anything we have seen before,' Dr. Pakes said this wave could be the most challenging yet seen in the fight against COVID-19.

'We knew from the start that this was going to be a marathon and the last few kilometres of a marathon are by far the hardest – this is what we may be experiencing right now,' he said. 'Omicron may cause milder illness among vaccinated, with the sheer number we're expecting, and with it being so much more easily transmissible, we are very concerned that hospital and ICU capacity could become overwhelmed. Our overall goal is to prevent this rapid surge and to protect hospital capacity by slowing the spread of the disease. Omicron will push COVID-19 cases to new heights, even by midweek this week. We know the risk of severe illness is higher in our unvaccinated and the risk increases with age. For this reason, our first priority for vaccination right now is boosters for residents who are age 70+, age 50+, or the immunocompromised, as well as residents who have not yet received their first or second doses.'

'Booster doses will continue to expand to 18+ once we're able to meet demand among those most vulnerable who are the 50+ population. This is an ethical imperative. Expanding eligibility to 18+ and shortening the interval between doses has brought the number of individuals eligible for a booster to over 700,000 individuals in York Region. We also have approximately 60,000 York Region children aged 5 – 11 who still need to receive their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. That is a lot of vaccine to administer and not a lot of time. We have been working diligently with internal and community partners in York Region and we're thankful for our local municipalities who have been incredibly helpful in assisting us set up additional mass vaccination clinics as soon as we possibly can.'

An up-to-date listing of area vaccination clinics can be found at [York.ca/covid19vaccine](https://york.ca/covid19vaccine).

But since the Province announced its expanded booster eligibility last week, the Region has doubled its capacity to administer the shots. They look forward to continuing to increase capacity 'even further' in the days and months ahead.

Walk-ins at Region-led clinics are only being accepted for first and second doses rather than booster shots.

'Although this might frustrate some in the 18-49 age group who are eligible for their booster doses as of [Monday], it is in everyone's interest that our hospital capacity is protected and our focus must remain on administering booster doses to those 50+ and giving children 5 – 11 their first dose,' said Dr. Pakes. 'As we ramp up our mass vaccination clinics, we will add vaccination opportunities for those 18+ at our clinics.'

As of Monday, December 20, Aurora was grappling with 141 active cases of COVID-19.

Since the start of the pandemic, there have been 2,327 total cases of COVID-19 in Aurora and 48 fatalities attributed to the virus. 2,138 cases are now marked as recovered.

Of the active cases, 1,658 are attributed to local transmission, close contact or unknown exposure, 19 to schools, 8 to workplace exposure, and 4 to travel.

By Monday, 91.2 per cent of eligible residents aged 12 and up had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while the rate of residents with two doses stood at 89.5.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter