

Concerns rise over community spread of UK variant

The UK variant of the virus that causes COVID-19 continues to show evidence of community spread, according to Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Medical Officer of Health.

Dr. Kurji provided his weekly COVID-19 update on Monday morning after Aurora saw three more deaths attributed to COVID-19 and three additional outbreaks in long-term/retirement and congregate living settings.

"We are seeing more and more cases of the variant now in York Region," said Dr. Kurji. "As of today (January 25), we have 15 confirmed cases. We have been able to get details on all except one and nine of these 15 have been acquired locally. They don't seem to have any association with travel histories. This is not good news for us and we know that the labs are going to be sending us at least three more to us to investigate. It is very important now that we try to manage the spread of this variant, delay it as much as possible, hopefully until such time as we have all been immunized, which is going to be an almost impossible task. So, it is important that we collectively work towards ensuring we're following the same physical distancing guidelines."

As of Monday, January 25, York Region has identified four cases of the variant in King Township, with all four cases from the same family who are linked to travel to the UK; Georgina has seen three cases, a male and female in their 60s attributed to community transmission, and a female in her 50s with close contact to a UK travel case; three cases have been identified in Markham, two in Vaughan, and one each in Newmarket and Richmond Hill.

Given the recent disruption in Pfizer's supply chain, vaccinations over the next couple of weeks are expected to be "somewhat limited," he added. York Region Public Health has continued to immunize long-term care and retirement homes in conjunction with local hospitals, EMS, and community doctors and nurses.

"We are just starting to immunize the same folks with the second doses as one requires the second dose to get optimal levels of protection, particularly for the long-term care and retirement home residents," said Dr. Kurji. "We will be endeavouring to reach other priority groups when the opportunities present themselves, which is largely a question mark of having enough vaccines."

Despite the rollout of the vaccine to retirement and long-term care homes, the past week "January 19 to January 26" has seen three new outbreaks declared by York Region Public Health, two of them in residences specializing in senior care.

Chartwell Aurora, which has previously overcome three outbreaks, was reported to once again be in outbreak mode on January 24. Kingsway Place Retirement Residence saw a second outbreak declared on Friday, January 22, little more than three days after their first outbreak was declared over on Tuesday, January 19. An additional outbreak has been reported at Safe Haven Aurora Community Living on Aurora Heights Drive.

During the same time period, three further Aurorans, all residents of Willows Estate LTC, have lost their battle with COVID-19. An additional death was reported on Tuesday, bringing Aurora's death toll to 33.

A 75-year-old man succumbed to COVID-19 on Saturday, January 16, after receiving positive test results on January 7. Two further deaths occurred on January 19 "a 94-year-old woman who first tested positive on January 3, with symptoms appearing on January 6, and a 78-year-old woman who first tested positive on January 16 after first experiencing symptoms the day before.

As of January 26, 10 residents of Willows Estate have died of COVID-19 since their outbreak was declared on December 24. 44 cases amongst their residential complement of 78 have been identified. Of their 90 health care workers, 24 have also contracted the virus.

The Town's 33rd fatality, reported January 26, was a 74-year-old male who succumbed to the virus at Southlake Regional Health Centre on January 16. In a case related to an institutional outbreak at the hospital, he first tested positive and experienced the first

symptoms of COVID-19 on January 1.

To date, Aurora has seen 822 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 33 of which have proved fatal. 51 cases remain active. Of the 51 active cases, 29 are attributed to local transmission or close contact, 17 are attributed to institutional outbreak, 4 to workplace cluster, and 1 to travel.

ISOLATION CENTRE

If you live with others and are unable to self-isolate, a voluntary isolation centre now open in York Region has made quarantine easier.

The Voluntary Isolation Centre is open to residents "facing complex barriers who may otherwise be unable to safely self-isolate away from others in their household," says York Region Public Health.

The Voluntary Isolation Centre, which is funded by the Province and operated by the Canadian Red Cross, is free to eligible residents.

Eligible residents include those waiting for COVID-19 test results, residents who are or are likely to be COVID-19 positive, or close contacts of a COVID-19 positive case.

"Earlier on in the pandemic, we were seeing close contacts living in small households," said Dr. Kurji. "However, more recently, we have found that the households seem to be bigger households and more and more transmission has been occurring in those places. In order to facilitate close contacts being able to isolate more safely, York Region has established a voluntary isolation centre."

For more information on the Voluntary Isolation Centre, visit York.ca/isolationcentre or call Access York at 1-877-464-9675 x72500.

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