

COVID-19 vaccines for youngest population available Thursday

COVID-19 vaccines for children aged six-months to five years will roll out this Thursday.

As of 8 a.m. on July 28, parents and caregivers can book vaccines for their kids through the Provincial Booking Portal, York Region Public Health (York.ca/COVID19) or by calling Access York at 1-877-464-9675.

?We know many of you have been eager to get your kids vaccinated, so thank you for being patient,? said Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, in his bi-weekly update on the local COVID situation Monday. ?We're working with our healthcare partners to make sure we're prepared for vaccinating this age group here in York Region. This dose for young children will be important for children who are immunocompromised or otherwise vulnerable but also for those who are in daycare or group environments on a regular basis or who have vulnerable household members.

?Anyone over aged 12 is now eligible for a fourth dose or second booster in Ontario. The messaging around this dose, ?available but not strongly recommended for younger people', has been confusing. Many people have been asking if they need the fourth dose now or if they should wait until the fall. If you are over 60, the answer is yes, you should get a fourth dose now. If you have a chronic condition or an immunocompromising condition, or live or work with someone vulnerable, the answer is also yes ? you should get a fourth dose as soon as you can. Almost everyone else can certainly benefit from a fourth dose during this second wave, but if you had your third dose in the last five months or if you've had COVID in the last three months, you may consider waiting.?

The latest vaccine developments come as York Region experiences a surge in hospitalizations related to COVID-19 and the current seventh wave of the virus. While Dr. Pakes says the latest wave ?hopefully may be peaking shortly,? wastewater signals indicate that COVID-19 is now as high as it was during the peak of the sixth wave.

?Hospitalizations across Ontario have risen quite dramatically over the last two weeks to 1,500 COVID cases in hospitals,? said Dr. Pakes. ?In York Region, hospitalized COVID cases have doubled over the last month. We have all heard how our hospital emergency rooms and in-patient wards are overwhelmed both because of these case counts and because of ongoing health human resource issues.

?While these challenges are system-wide there are things you can do to make a difference. You can contribute to preventing this problem from worsening. We know that the individual and population-level protection of the COVID-19 vaccine is dramatically increased by a third or booster dose. It is clear that the mRNA COVID vaccines are really three-dose vaccines, not two-dose vaccines. If you or someone you know has not yet had their third or first booster dose, please walk in or make an appointment at a York Region Public Health Vaccine Clinic as soon as possible.?

There is ?some urgency? in getting a fourth dose/second booster sooner rather than later, he added, because not only will it provide protection but it will dovetail with a new vaccine which is ?likely to be released this fall? offering better protection against Omicron variants.

?There will be a three-month interval between the bivalent vaccine and your fourth dose, so if you get your fourth dose now it will likely put you in a good position to get the bivalent vaccine when it is available,? he said. ?From a public health perspective, we're still focused on getting the message out that everyone needs a third dose. At the community level this is key. The fourth dose is a good idea for most and the vaccine for young children is something you will want to seriously consider to protect your child and those that they interact with from infection and severe infection.

?I know we're all trying to enjoy our summer and to gather in ways we weren't able to in previous years. Please don't forget to always have a mask with you just in case. Although it is not mandatory, masking is a reasonable and easy defence against getting infection yourself or transmitting it to others.

?I know it is important for everyone's mental health and social wellbeing to see friends and family, but please remain home if you are ill and take COVID-19 symptoms seriously. Even as we all look forward to this wave peaking and declining shortly, we know that the fall will likely bring with it another surge of COVID-19 as well as other respiratory infections. The more we can do to reduce the burden of COVID-19 now, the better the fall will be.?

MONKEYPOX UPDATE Last week, the World Health Organization declared Monkeypox a ?public health emergency of international concern? and Dr. Pakes says the virus is ?definitely present? in York Region.

As such, monkeypox vaccine is now available in York Region for some specific populations who are at risk. To see if you're eligible, visit York.ca/monkeypox.

?Know that monkeypox is transmitted in a very different way than COVID-19, predominantly through close or intimate contact,? said Dr. Pakes.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter