

COVID-related deaths in York Region pass 1,000 as wastewater signals plateau

More than 1,000 residents of York Region have succumbed to COVID-related illness, according to York Region Public Health.

The local health authority reported the 'sombre milestone' in August as recent wastewater signals have suggested COVID transmission might be plateauing.

'This sombre milestone serves as a stark reminder that COVID-19 remains active in our communities and has significantly impacted all residents over the last several years,' said York Region Chairman Wayne Emmerson in a statement. 'As we continue to respond to the seventh wave of COVID-19, I assure all residents that protecting the health and safety of our communities continues to be the top priority of Regional Council and York Region Public Health.'

'As we reflect on our 1,000th death, we can be comforted by the knowledge our efforts over the last few years prevented thousands more deaths. Recent studies have confirmed lockdowns, masking, vaccination and other measures at various stages of the pandemic had a profound impact not only on preventing illnesses and deaths, but on preventing other economic and social impacts.'

'Part of this reflection must also be on gratitude. In particular, to all health care and public health staff who have served and continue to serve our communities and others. We should also be thankful to all those who contributed to our collective response, in large and small ways.'

In his bi-weekly update on the local COVID-19 situation last week, York Region's Medical Officer of Health Dr. Barry Pakes said both vaccines and masking were the best line of defence in light of this milestone.

But there was also some hope. While wastewater signals Ontario-wide have 'plateaued,' he said, the same data in York Region has shown signs of decline 'though not to the levels we were hoping for at this point,' he said.

'The burden of severe COVID-19 in our hospitals also remains persistently high in York Region and across Ontario,' said Dr. Pakes. 'While our high vaccination rates have contributed significantly to protecting us, our immunity is waning. Having a three or four dose coverage across the Board in York Region would make a real difference. Recent data from Public Health Ontario confirms that people with one or two boosters were well-protected from being hospitalized or dying of COVID-19, compared to those of only two doses. This includes people who have also had COVID. This is particularly significant among those who are over age 60. Two doses are simply not enough to protect you from severe illness or hospitalization.'

People 12 years of age or older are being encouraged to get their third dose 'right away,' while for younger kids, the drive to get vaccinated will renew.

'Health Canada recently approved a third dose or the first booster for kids aged 5-11. This was very eagerly anticipated in many families and here at York Region public health. We're providing and preparing our clinics to provide this dose to children as we wait to hear more from the Province about its plans.'

'Speaking of children and getting ready for Back to School, children aged 5-11 who haven't received their first or second dose should do so now as part of your preparation for the new school year. If the majority of children in your classrooms are vaccinated, both students and seniors will be better protected and better able to spend more time in person where they belong.'

'We're hopeful that the recent plateau in the wastewater signals and in hospitalizations translates into a downward trajectory going forward, but this remains to be seen. We're also very hopeful of the bivalent Moderna vaccine that is specific for the Omicron variant. This vaccine was approved in the UK just last week and we look forward to its approval and availability in Canada in the near future. This vaccine will most certainly help to prevent a more challenging wave in Ontario through the fall and winter.'

I know many of you are thinking about waiting for this bivalent vaccine which will be available later this year rather than getting your fourth dose now. That approach is reasonable but it is not to take the place of the third dose. Please make sure to get your first booster or your third dose as soon as possible.?

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