

COVID's seventh wave comes as hospitals continue to struggle with capacity

Ontario is settling into its seventh wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Numbers are rising along with hospital admissions, says Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health.

"We're in our seventh wave of COVID-19 [and] the levels of COVID-19 in our wastewater, which are the best markers we have of COVID-19 in our community are markedly increased in York Region as well as Ontario," said Dr. Pakes on Monday. "These levels have been increasing over the last few weeks and most significantly in the last week. This is due to the more transmissible BA.5 variant and it means that COVID-19 is circulating at high levels. Not yet as high as the previous wave but high and still increasing.

"Unfortunately, we also saw an increase in hospitalizations and severe illness related to COVID-19. We know that this additional burden on hospitals comes at a time when we cannot afford it with hospitals already very much overburdened with their usual work, as well as the COVID backlog and persistent staffing changes across healthcare and public health."

The best way to "make a difference" is to continue with masking and stay up-to-date on vaccinations, he added. Increases in third and fourth dose coverage can make a difference for everyone, he added.

"For many York Region residents, it has been many, many months since their last dose and for many this was their second dose," he said. "Now is the time to get your third dose or your booster dose. We know that COVID-19 vaccine is fundamentally a three-dose vaccine. It requires three doses for high and sustained protection against COVID infection and most importantly against severe infection. We also know that immunity wanes over time, so even if you have had COVID already you can get it again and the vaccine can make a difference not only for you but in someone you might spread it to as well.

"Even if you had COVID-19 this winter, the BA.1 variant, or even more recently, you can get reinfected. Though BA.5 is not known to be more severe than the other variants, I have actually been surprised at how ill some acquaintances and colleagues have been with BA.5. We do know no matter how severe your illness is, having COVID-19 increases the risk of long COVID.

"If it is like other waves, we expect this wave to last seven to eight weeks. With this heightened level of transmission of a new variant, we need to be extra cautious and respectful of people who are vulnerable or immunocompromised."

FIRST MONKEYPOX CASES IN YORK REGION

Last week, the Public Health department reported the first local cases of monkeypox in York Region.

The two first cases, they said, were not connected to one another.

"Human monkeypox is a rare infectious disease and the risk for most people in the community is considered to be very low," said Dr. Pakes. "York Region Public Health continues to monitor the situation and follow up with all close contacts of the two cases, who have both been isolating appropriately."

Monkeypox is caused by a virus that does not spread easily between people. When it does, it spreads through prolonged close contact such as between household members or during intimate contact (e.g.: skin-to-skin contact, sex). It may also spread through contact with contaminated materials, such as bedding or laundry, or from contact with body fluids, such as the fluid from monkeypox sores.

Common symptoms of monkeypox infection are:

- Fever - Headache - Muscle aches - Exhaustion - Swollen lymph nodes - New rash or sores/lesions (typically appear a few

days after other symptoms, beginning on face, around genital areas and/or extremities)

?These symptoms are common among many diseases and having symptoms does not necessarily indicate a monkeypox infection,? said the Region. ?Anyone who may have come in contact with a suspected or confirmed monkeypox case and is feeling unwell ? or has symptoms that could be consistent with monkeypox ? should isolate and contact their health care provider.?

Like other diseases that spread through close contact, people can lower their risk of being exposed to monkeypox by avoiding close contact with those who are unwell, practicing good hand and respiratory hygiene and practicing safer sex.

Monkeypox vaccine clinics will be offered to people who may be at higher risk of infection and who meet eligibility criteria set by the Ontario Ministry of Health. Vaccines for the general population are currently not recommended. For information on vaccine eligibility, booking and clinic information, visit york.ca/monkeypox.

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