

## If you experience COVID symptoms, assume you have it: Region

If you're not considered high-risk and exhibit signs of COVID-19, assume you have it and isolate accordingly.

That is the message being delivered by the Province of Ontario and York Region Public Health as the Omicron variant continues to surge.

On Monday, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Barry Pakes, supported what he described as the Province's "significant changes" to testing and isolation guidelines which shifts a focus on testing away from the general public "and school settings" to high-risk individuals.

"The goal of these changes was to protect the most vulnerable populations and to preserve our healthcare capacity," said Dr. Pakes. "Unfortunately, we are now also seeing a significant increase in hospitalization and the beginnings of an increase in ICU admissions."

"To allow for continued testing in high-risk settings and for high-risk individuals, the Province is limiting access to publicly-funded PCR testing. Tests will only be available for those who meet specific medical criteria or are at risk of severe illness from COVID-19. This includes workers and residents in the highest-risk settings such as hospitals, long-term care, retirement homes, and congregate living settings. Any York Region resident who is experiencing symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and does not have access to a rapid antigen test should assume they are infected with COVID-19 and immediately self-isolate to prevent community transmission."

Isolation for individuals who have already been fully vaccinated has been reduced from 10 days down to 5 "with isolation for unvaccinated individuals remaining status quo" in light of "growing evidence that non-high-risk people with COVID-19" who have been vaccinated "do not tend to spread COVID beyond five days after they develop symptoms," said Dr. Pakes.

"For this reason, individuals who are fully vaccinated or under the age of 12 will be required to isolate after only five days, so long as their symptoms are resolved or improved over the last 24 hours," he continued. "This does not apply to anyone who is unvaccinated, partially vaccinated or immunocompromised. These individuals must isolate for the full 10 days from their last exposure to someone with COVID-19, or the date their symptoms began, or their diagnosis date."

York Region Public Health, he added, will no longer be "directly involved" with managing the virus in schools, nor will cohorts with exposures to COVID-19 be dismissed once in-person learning returns. This is in line with recently announced changes from the Ontario Government.

"At this time, York Region Public Health supports the latest Provincial direction and does not plan to take any further restrictive measures in our schools or our community," said Dr. Pakes. "We continue to monitor and consider measures based on our local data and the trends we see. That said, with the number of cases we're seeing, York Region Public Health has had to adapt and shift our focus with case and contact management efforts restricted to only those who are in high-risk settings."

"Average risk individuals will no longer be receiving a call from York Region Public Health. If you're not in a high-risk setting and you have symptoms of COVID-19 or have had a positive rapid antigen test or positive PCR test, we're relying on you to notify your household members and other close contacts to follow isolation guidelines and help curb the spread of Omicron."

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter