

Omicron is 'unlike anything we have encountered' during pandemic, says Southlake

Over the span of last week, Southlake Regional Health Centre saw the number of patients admitted to hospital increase from 20 to more than 60, leading to an alarm bell being sounded for doctors and nurses on the frontlines.

Last Thursday, Southlake said the spread of the Omicron variant was 'unlike anything we have encountered in the pandemic to date' and warned they continue to see 'significant numbers' of hospital staff test positive or require time off due to exposure to COVID-19.

'Based on Provincial directives and the need to preserve hospital capacity and reduce the spread of the virus, Southlake has had to make a series of difficult decisions,' said the hospital. 'With cases and hospitalizations increasing at an alarming pace, all hospitals in Ontario have been directed to cancel selected surgeries in order to increase bed capacity and free up staff to be redeployed. Southlake is following this directive and staff from our surgical program have already started to care for patients in other areas of the hospital.'

'Staffing has become a significant challenge and we are doing everything we can to mitigate this. Healthcare workers are now more impacted by the increased spread of COVID-19 in the community than ever before. This, combined with the increased number of patients in the hospital with COVID-19, continues to put pressure on our teams. Similar to previous waves, we have started to redeploy staff into different areas of the hospital based on patient need. Our amazing staff and physicians are the heart and soul of Southlake. Their dedication, tenacity and compassion has been a constant source of inspiration throughout the pandemic.'

The struggle faced by hospitals like Southlake in response to the Omicron variant was tackled at the start of the week by Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health.

The cancellation of some surgeries, he said, along with the closure of schools until at least January 17, are 'designed to keep the burden on the healthcare system to a minimum.'

'We understand how frustrating the return to these restrictions could be, but we have seen from experience they can truly make a difference and hopefully this time they will be more short-lived,' said Dr. Pakes.

People might feel, he added, that the fight against COVID-19 is 'moving backward rather than forward,' but said there are still 'good news stories' coming out of the local fight, including York Region's decision to lift the limits on boosters through the local health unit and expanding eligibility to residents between the ages of 18 and 49. There is also a new priority for education workers getting their boosters.

'Ontario data suggests that vaccine effectiveness with a booster against infection is still in the 30 ? 40 per cent range with Pfizer and close to 60 per cent with Moderna,' he said. 'More importantly, protection against hospitalization and severe illness is in the 70 ? 80 per cent range. The booster can truly make a difference for each of us and for our healthcare system.'

'For those small number of York Region residents who are still unvaccinated, I have a special message and a special plea: while infections are occurring in vaccinated and unvaccinated alike, the hospitalization, ICU admissions and deaths are largely in the unvaccinated. This is true in Ontario and across the world.'

Vaccines will also be integral, he added, in making sure there is a return to school sooner rather than later, underscoring the value of in-person learning to students' mental and physical wellbeing.

York Region Public Health is 'advocating a return to in-person learning and continuing to engage with schools and the Province to support this.'

The most important thing you can do to get students back to sustained in-person learning is to get your child vaccinated, he concluded. Over half of York Region children are vaccinated and without higher coverage, we might continue to see unfortunately high numbers of children visiting emergency rooms and being admitted.

LOCAL STATS

As of Monday, January 10, Aurora was grappling with 263 confirmed active cases of COVID-19, but, as York Region Public Health notes, this number is an under-estimate.

With rapid transmission of Omicron and recent provincial changes in testing eligibility and case management, case counts and outbreaks reported through the COVID-19 in York Region interactive dashboard are an under-estimate of the true number of individuals with COVID-19 and outbreaks in York Region, the Region stated, adding case counts should be treated with caution. Public Health units across Ontario are prioritizing case management of high-risk individuals and settings. Workplace outbreaks are no longer reported.

Of the confirmed active cases, 235 are attributed to local transmission, close contact or unknown exposure and 28 to institutional outbreak.

Since the start of the global pandemic, York Region Public Health has been able to confirm 3,545 cases of COVID-19 as of Monday. 3,234 cases are now marked as resolved and there have been 48 fatalities attributed to the virus.

91 per cent of Aurora residents aged 12 and up have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 89.6 per cent had received two doses by the start of the week.

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