

?Only a matter of time? before new variant reaches Ontario: top doc

It's ?only a matter of time? before the so-called ?Kraken? variant of COVID-19 is here in Ontario, according to Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health.

In his latest update to the community on January 9, the Region's top doctor said the ?concerning? new variant is causing ?well over 50 per cent of cases in the U.S.? and was recently detected in British Columbia.

?It has the increased ability to evade some immunity and a bit more ability to attach to lung cells, meaning it is outcompeting with other sub-lineages and is likely to cause a surge in cases, hospitalizations, and potentially deaths in the coming weeks,? he said.

The threat of a surge due to the new variant means the community needs to redouble its vaccination efforts.

?Between September and the end of 2022, there were over five COVID deaths every single week in York Region residents,? said Dr. Pakes. ?We know that these were preventable with the disproportionate number of people not being vaccinated or being incompletely vaccinated; that is, they haven't been vaccinated within the last six months and they didn't have a bivalent vaccine. That is the vaccine that prevents against Omicron. The previous vaccines do not provide the same protection, so if you had two, three or even four vaccines but not the bivalent vaccines, you're not as protected as you could be.

?Just over 40 per cent of those over age 70 have had the bivalent vaccine in York Region but all of us should have it. You may still get COVID, but you're far less likely to get severely ill or be hospitalized or die if you have been vaccinated with the bivalent vaccine. Over 200,000 York Region residents have a bivalent dose. It's time to get yours. Even if you had COVID, if your infection was over three months ago and you haven't had the bivalent vaccine, please visit one of our clinics or your nearest pharmacy. You can also receive your annual flu shot at the same time. It's not too late.?

Dr. Pakes encourages all residents who aren't up-to-date on their vaccine to visit one of York Region Public Health's clinics to get boosted. Public Health has maintained its clinic capacity to ensure convenience for residents.

?We have seen vaccine coverage in the Province and York Region stall in the most high-risk neighbourhoods. Many of these neighbourhoods have higher case counts, hospitalizations and deaths throughout the pandemic. We need to redouble our efforts in these areas. It may be time to kindly inform or encourage your friends and loved ones, no matter what neighbourhood they live in, to get vaccinated, particularly those over age 70 but also those of any age. You can make a difference in your community.

?It's not only COVID that continues to overwhelm our acute care hospitals. Fortunately, influenza cases have declined somewhat recently, but RSV remains a significant threat to children. I have recently seen several young children with RSV who needed intensive care. Watching a baby struggle to breathe is heartbreaking and it is preventable. Following our busy holiday season of gatherings, let's all do our part to prevent additional spread of all these circulating viruses. Please monitor yourself for any cold or flu-like symptoms. Should you have any symptoms, please remain home from school or work. If you do have to go out, follow all other layers of protection: practice good hand hygiene, remain distant wherever possible, and wear a mask if you have symptoms ? and ideally for 10 days after your symptoms began.?

For more, visit York.ca/Covid19.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter