

Public Health encourages continued mask-wearing in classrooms amid rising absences

Students and staff in York Region's two biggest school boards should resume and continue wearing masks amid rising absences for youth and adults alike, according to York Region Public Health.

Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, renewed these calls in his weekly pandemic update on Monday just before students were due to return to classrooms after the Easter long weekend.

?Those with children in schools in York Region will have received a letter jointly from our largest boards or from York Region Public Health to other boards and public schools [and] this letter shared with parents that our local schools and school boards are experiencing a significant increase in student and staff absences over the last two weeks. For this reason, and in partnership with our school boards, York Region Public Health is strongly recommending that all students, staff members and visitors wear a mask in school following the return on April 19.

?Everyone should wear a well-fitted three-layer mask or a medical mask in classrooms, common areas, including hallways, and while using school transportation. Wearing a mask significantly reduces transmission and helps prevent the need for school closures due to staff shortages. Our main goal is to protect your child and others from contracting COVID-19 while keeping kids in school for learning.?

Increased absences, noted Dr. Pakes, are also being seen in the healthcare system.

But, while the number of cases and the rate of community transmission of COVID-19 due to the BA2 variant continues to rise rapidly, there are signs that the sixth wave may have peaked.

?We're well into the sixth wave of the pandemic driven by the more transmissible BA2 variant, waning immunity and the lifting of pandemic control measures, including gathering limits and, most recently, the mask mandate,? said Dr. Pakes. ?This wave, we have seen a dramatic increase of transmission in the community which we are tracking with our wastewater signal. Fortunately, it appears that this increase appears to be slowing somewhat in York Region and across Ontario and may have peaked.

?This leveling off is still tentative and uncertain. Unfortunately, we know that hospitalizations are increasing and recent Ontario Science Table modelling data predicts the continued moderate increase in hospitalizations will go on for several more weeks, as well as high rates of COVID-related absenteeism in healthcare staff, meaning a continued impact on everyone's access to non-COVID healthcare.

?In York Region, our hospitals are reporting that admissions have recently stabilized and overall in Ontario we're hopeful that this increase in hospitalizations will be smaller than the last Omicron wave thanks to third and fourth doses that so many York Region residents have received to protect themselves and their community.?

Continued vaccinations and continued masking will continue to keep things moving in a positive direction, he added.

?York Region residents are continuing to mask in most indoor settings. Thank you for making the right choice. Both York Region Public Health and Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health are strongly recommending the use of masks in all indoor public settings. This is especially important when you're faced with the 3 Cs: Crowds, Confined spaces with poor ventilation, or Close Contact with others, or certainly when you may be around those who are more vulnerable like the elderly and the immunocompromised.

?The most important thing you can do now to contribute to your own wellbeing and to blunt this wave and its impact on the acute care system is to make sure you and your family are up to date on your COVID-19 vaccinations. Everyone over 12 should now have

three doses. Children 5 ? 11 should have two doses, and those over 60 can now get a fourth dose. Getting your booster protects you from hospitalization or severe illness by almost 90 per cent over three months, and over 80 per cent for the next four to six months. Vaccination with a third dose also makes it less likely that you'll transmit infections to others if you do get infected.?

Vaccinations can be booked online at [York.ca/COVID19vaccine](#) or over the phone via Access York at 1-877-464-9675.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter