

## Public Health greets upcoming lifting of mask mandate with caution

Ontario will lift mask mandates in most settings by March 21.

While some exceptions will still be in place, such as on public transit, health care settings, long-term care homes, and congregate care settings, York Region Public Health is urging residents to continue to opt into wearing masks and face coverings.

In a statement last week, Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health for the Province, said following the peak of the Omicron variant, mask mandates would lift Monday in line with "continued improvement in trends."

"As a society, we must remain kind, considerate and respectful towards those who continue wearing a mask," he said. "We must also expect indicators, such as cases and hospitalizations, to increase slightly as Ontarians increasingly interact with one another. However, thanks to our high vaccination rates and natural immunity, as well as the arrival of antivirals, Ontario has the tools necessary to manage the impact of the virus. I want to thank Ontarians for their ongoing resilience and commitment to community as we navigated this global pandemic together. Your sacrifices and collective actions have made a difference.

"While this does not signal that COVID-19 has disappeared or that the pandemic is over, it does mean that we have come to a place where we know what we need to do to manage this virus and to keep each other safe. We need to remain vigilant. We need to stay home when sick. And, most importantly, we need to get vaccinated and boosted."

On Monday, however, Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, shared many of these sentiments with an extra note of caution, stating that "some of the most significant changes over the last two years have occurred over the last few weeks."

"With this change coming next week, people have a mix of relief and fear, but in some ways these changes aren't as significant as we think," said Dr. Pakes. "Yes, we're now permitted to gather, shop and eat almost as normal. Yes, the mask mandate will expire shortly but that doesn't mean we will be dropping masks or that we need to gather all at once. Gradual change is the name of the game and moving slowly is important for each of us, mentally and for all of us as a society. It is also the best approach for preventing a pandemic resurgence. You can and are encouraged to still wear a mask in most settings, particularly in crowds, confined spaces and when close to others. You just aren't mandated to do so now.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is not over and COVID-19 is far from endemic. Some metrics are pointing in the right direction while others are worrisome. In Ontario, our wastewater signal is stable, our hospitalizations are stable and decreasing slowly, but deaths remain persistently high. Our positivity rate increased this past week. If we look across the pond, many countries in Europe saw increasing rates this past week. This is something we're watching with concern. The upcoming removal of the mask mandate in most settings still requires masks in public transit, in hospitals, in other healthcare settings and congregate settings, as well as in several other scenarios, depending on your personal circumstances. You will need to mask up if you're recently returned from out of country or if you have contacted a case."

Although he conceded that many York Region residents are "enthusiastic" to take off their masks, many people are "fearful or uncomfortable" with the upcoming change, particularly those who are most vulnerable and/or immunocompromised.

"We continue to encourage mask wearing indoors out of consideration for others and strongly encourage masking if you're in areas with large crowds, in poorly ventilated spaces or confined settings, or in places where you will be in close contact with others," he said. "For the next several weeks, please do carry a mask in your pocket so you're able to protect yourselves and others where appropriate. Above all else, remember to be kind and considerate as we navigate the new phase of the pandemic.

"Vaccination is our one best defence against COVID-19. Third doses are critically important for everyone above age 12 and new data confirms what we already knew: immunity from a second dose wanes after just two months and almost completely after three or four months. Two doses do provide good protection from severe illness, but a third dose boosts this protection to 95 per cent,

according to Ontario data. To protect children as they return to school after March break, it is critical that they be vaccinated.?

## LOCAL STATS

As of Monday, March 14, Aurora was experiencing 16 confirmed active cases of COVID-19, according to York Region Public Health.

But, as the Region notes, this number is an under-estimate of the real number.

?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 at the start of January, 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.?

The Region is no longer reporting source of exposure for active cases.

Since the start of the global pandemic, York Region Public Health had been able to confirm 4,293 PCR-confirmed cumulative cases of COVID-19 in Aurora as of March 14. 4,216 cases are now marked as resolved. There have been 61 fatalities attributed to the virus.

89.9 per cent of Aurora residents aged 5 and up have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 87.4 per cent had received two doses by the start of the week.

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