

## Residents 70+ can register for vaccines this week: Region

York Region residents born in 1951 or earlier can now book appointments for the COVID-19 vaccine.

York Region Public Health announced Monday it was opening up the vaccine program to a new age bracket on Monday after ending the week with nearly 80 per cent of residents born in or before 1941 receiving at least their first inoculation.

Opening the program to those aged 70+ was effective Tuesday, March 23 at 8.30 a.m., and these shots are presently available at several Regionally- and community-run clinics throughout York, including Newmarket's Ray Twinney Complex, the Richmond Green Sports Centre in Richmond Hill, Markham's Aaniin Community Centre and Cornell Community Centre, Vaughan's Cortellucci Vaughan Hospital and Maple Community Centre and the Georgina Ice Palace.

With these latest developments, COVID-19 vaccinations are now available to those born in or before 1951, the highest-, very-, and high-priority health care workers as identified by Ontario's Ministry of Public Health; staff, essential caregivers and any residents that have not yet received a first dose in long-term care homes, retirement homes, and First Nations Elder Care homes; alternative level of care patients in hospitals who have confirmed admissions to a long-term care home, retirement home, or other congregate care homes for seniors; Indigenous adults and members of their households; and eligible adult recipients of chronic home care.

Although the vaccine is now available to further segments of older residents, the Region stressed at the start of the week that older priority groups are still able to book their shots.

"We have given over 100,000 doses between Public Health and our partners locally and hitting these milestones is encouraging and the light at the end of the tunnel gets just a little bit brighter every day," said Dr. Fareen Karachiwalla, York Region's Associate Medical Officer of Health. "York Region continues to move forward to the next priority groups as quickly as possible. Most recently, we opened appointments to residents aged 75 to 79 ahead of the Provincial start date. We are expecting to receive roughly 60,000 doses of vaccine each week for the next two weeks.

"People previously identified as being eligible to receive a vaccine but who have not yet booked an appointment are still able to do this and we very strongly encourage it, even if we have moved onto the next eligible group."

In addition to opening up vaccines to more residents at community clinics, the Region this week will also start rolling out vaccinations to homebound residents, working with community partners, local hospital and the Local Health Integration Network. There are more than 3,000 residents deemed to be homebound and the Region cautions that it will take some time to reach all eligible recipients.

"We continue to ask for your patience as we work to get vaccines to those who can't as easily come to a clinic," said Dr. Karachiwalla. "We also recommend that homebound residents or those receiving home care to consider booking an appointment at one of our drive-thru clinics if you can attend. Last week, we had a test run of the drive-thru clinic at Canada's Wonderland and what we have learned will be used to improve the process when the site officially opens on March 29."

In Monday's update, Dr. Karachiwalla addressed concerns expressed by some residents over a move to expand the window of opportunity for a second dose of COVID vaccines to 16 weeks. Following this advice from vaccine experts, she said widening this gap has enabled York Region to be ahead of the game.

"A lot of people are asking how we have been able to make such good progress here in York Region and it is partly because we started about two weeks earlier than most other jurisdictions but also because of the Ministry of Health's recent decision to extend the second vaccine dose to 16 weeks on the advice of a national body of vaccine experts. While we recognize that this means some people have to wait longer for their second dose than they thought, this decision does allow us to give those doses as first doses so more of the community at risk can be protected sooner. This is a very good thing because the rates of COVID and rates of variants of

concern, are unpredictable right now. The quicker we can vaccinate the majority of people, the better off we can all be and the sooner we might be able to get back to some of those activities we dearly miss.

?Data from both clinical trials and real-world effectiveness have shown that people get very good protection from even just one dose of the vaccine and that protection isn't expected to decline quickly. Also, this recommendation comes from the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, a long-standing expert group and it is being followed in Ontario and other places in Canada as well.

?We know through years of data and learning about the principles of how vaccines work that stretching out the time interval of a second dose is unlikely to interfere with protection. In fact, it is the opposite: getting a dose too early is when problems with protection come into play. With some of the approved vaccines like AstraZeneca, stretching out the interval a bit longer actually helps with effectiveness in some cases. Many other types of vaccines, non-COVID ones like Hepatitis B, do have booster doses months or even years after the first dose. We know this pandemic has been hard on everybody and understandably people are eager to get their vaccines. Remember, this is the largest rollout of vaccines we have ever experienced across the world, so things will evolve and guidance and recommendations are expected to change and adapt as we learn more. So, please be understanding and patient. We will get to everybody.?

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