

Threat of Omicron variant will take ?weeks? to confirm: Medical Officer of Health

The continuing climb of new cases of COVID-19, along with the identification of the Omicron variant, has left some residents concerned their holiday plans are in ?jeopardy,? says Dr. Barry Pakes, Medical Officer of Health for the Region of York.

But while rising cases are a reality, the Region's top doctor says it is too early to determine the true threat of the new variant.

?As we look to the community, we are seeing a gradual increase in cases across the province, with the highest case counts since May recorded yesterday (Sunday),? said Dr. Pakes at the start of the week. ?Unfortunately, this is not good news and may potentially put some of your holiday plans in jeopardy. If you haven't already, now is the time to get vaccinated.

?The Omicron variant, which had only been identified as a variant of concern last week, has now been found in Canada. There are no cases in York Region, but processes are underway to ensure we'll be able to detect cases if they do appear. Several countries, including Canada, have already implemented travel restrictions to limit and prevent the introduction of the Omicron variant in the Region. The Omicron variant does seem to be more transmissible than even the Delta variant and has a number of mutations that may make the vaccine less protective. This is only speculation at this time and it is going to take several more weeks to confirm whether or not the Omicron variant is a significant global threat or a threat to Canada and York Region.?

But, amid the ongoing uncertainty, a bright spot in York Region's fight against the virus has been the uptake of parents booking vaccine appointments for their children between the ages of five and 11.

12,000 vaccine appointments for kids were opened up last week by York Region Public Health in community, school-based and pop-up clinics and Dr. Pakes says he was ?thrilled? to see 95 per cent of the available appointments booked within the first two days ? and more appointment slots are being made available every day.

?Not only will the vaccine protect children from illness and prevent them from passing it on to parents and families, but it will help them stay in school in-person and help bring an end to the significant disruption to their lives,? he said. ?Children who get vaccinated in the coming weeks can look forward to their second dose close to the end of January and then be considered fully vaccinated by the end of February with all the benefits that brings.?

As of Monday, November 29, Aurora has seen a total of 2,103 cases of COVID-19, 2,043 of which are now marked as recovered. There have been 48 fatalities.

Of the 12 active cases, 8 are attributed to local transmission, close contact or unknown exposure, 2 to travel, 1 to school settings, and 1 to workplace exposure.

91.5 per cent of Aurora residents aged 12 and up had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by the same date, with those receiving two doses standing at 89 per cent.

By Brock Weir Editor/Local Journalism Initiative Reporter