

'Triple-demic' has waned, but caution still urged: Public Health

There are positive signs when it comes to the 'triple-demic' of COVID-19, influenza, and RSV, but Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, is urging the public to stay vigilant in the face of the so-called 'Kraken' variant.

In his bi-weekly update to the community, Dr. Pakes said recent cases of influenza have lowered 'dramatically' compared to the fall and wastewater signals for COVID-19 have also 'decreased substantially' compared to before and through the holiday period.

'Hospitalizations due to COVID are modestly decreased but not nearly enough,' said Dr. Pakes. 'In fact, one of the most significant challenges we continue to face is that when transmission, cases and hospitalizations do decrease somewhat with each subsequent wave they don't go down as far as they need to. This results in a chronic and ongoing strain on our acute care resources: our hospitals and our healthcare providers, that as we all have seen is unsustainable.'

'The more concerning news is the new Omicron subvariant circulating in our communities and across Southern Ontario. The variant is well known in other parts of the world, particularly the US, and is now rapidly out-competing other variants in Ontario and York Region. XBB.1.5 is known to be more transmissible than all previous variants and we worry this will mean a reversal of the positive trends [mentioned above]. While illness might not be as severe for most people who are immunized or have had COVID, the degree of transmissibility remains high and this means that numbers overall will be high and more severely ill people needing care.'

Actions to 'make a difference for yourself and your community' include getting the bivalent COVID-19 booster, he said, as the new variant is more immune-evasive than previous strains.

'This means that previous infection and vaccination will not protect as well against infection, but we do know that the bivalent vaccine and hybrid immunity does protect against severe infection, hospitalization and death,' said Dr. Pakes. 'We also know that this immunity wanes fairly quickly, certainly after six months. This new XBB.1.5 strain is a sub-lineage of the BA.5 Omicron variant. The bivalent vaccine provides protection against severe outcomes for omicron variants. It is critically important, particularly those who are older, but particularly everyone get the bivalent vaccine that is Omicron specific.'

In order to encourage greater booster coverage, York Region Public Health is planning to increase their mobile vaccination clinics in order to reach as many people as possible. A complete list of clinics, mobile or otherwise, is regularly updated at [York.ca/Covid19](https://york.ca/Covid19).

The bivalent vaccine is available for residents aged 5 and up.

'Almost half of those over 70-years-old have received the bivalent vaccine, which is great, but that still leaves a large number of people at increased risk,' said Dr. Pakes. 'Protect yourself and protect those who are most vulnerable and protect against yet another surge of hospitalizations by getting vaccinated.'

'I am hopeful that if we can increase our bivalent vaccine coverage across the entire population of York Region, and if we can continue to be responsible with personal and community protective measures, we will make it through this current variant and move towards a more hopeful and normal spring.'

By Brock Weir
Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter