

## Urgent action needs to be taken now on Omicron: Medical Officer of Health

As the Province continues to expand eligibility for COVID-19 vaccine boosters, Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, says "urgent action" needs to be taken now to curb the rise in new cases.

"Our cases have continued to climb to levels not seen in over six months," said Dr. Pakes in his weekly update on Monday. "Modelling released by the Province and our own local modellers at York Region Public Health has made it very clear that urgent action needs to be taken now in order to avoid a very significant increase in cases, leading to hospitalization, potentially to deaths, and a severe strain on our public health care system.

"We all hoped that the worst was behind us, but, unfortunately, we're now facing a very difficult period. In Ontario, we have seen an increase in almost 25 per cent over the past week and about five per cent of tested samples are now positive. Omicron cases now represent a majority of cases in the Province and are poised to overtake Delta as the dominant strain. Across the Province, we're seeing very significant transmission, despite widespread vaccination. While many of these individuals have symptoms, thankfully being fully vaccinated is preventing them from needing admission to the hospital."

Vaccination, he said, is still protecting people from "severe illness" but with the increase in transmission, a primary worry is unvaccinated and immunocompromised people "becoming very ill and needing acute care."

"We are also very concerned about waning immunity in those who are over age 50 and particularly those who are over age 70 who are at higher risk of severe disease," says Dr. Pakes.

This concern is reflected in the expansion of booster eligibility across the Province.

As of this past Monday, all residents over the age of 50 are now eligible for their boosters while, come Monday, all Ontarians 18 years of age or older will become eligible for theirs if they received their second dose at least three months previously.

Finally, as the holidays approach, the Province's Chief Medical Officer of Health is "strongly advising" people limit their social gatherings "including the number of gatherings they attend" over the holiday season.

"As we continue to learn more about the Omicron variant, we are taking additional measures to protect our progress as we head into the winter months," said Health Minister Christine Elliott. "Getting vaccinated and adhering to public health and workplace safety measures will continue to protect us and our loved ones against COVID and its variants, but we won't hesitate to continue to take swift action to ensure the continued health and safety of all Ontarians."

This position was reiterated by Dr. Pakes, who said further news of local impacts and restrictions would be coming this week. In the meantime, he stressed the importance of vaccinations to residents between the ages of 5 and 11 as well.

In order for students to have immunity from a first dose of a vaccine before they head back to school in January, a first dose needs to be administered by December 19, he said.

As of Tuesday, December 14, Aurora was grappling with 74 active cases of COVID-19, a jump from 22 on the previous Monday.

58 of the active cases are attributed to local transmission, close contact, or unknown exposure, 13 to school settings, 2 to workplace settings and 1 to travel.

Since the start of the global pandemic, the community has seen a total of 2,205 cases of COVID-19, with 2,083 cases now marked as recovered.

48 deaths have been attributed to the virus.

By the start of the week, 91.1 per cent of eligible residents aged 12 and up had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, with the percentage of residents with two standing at 89.4.

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