

## Vaccines are only shield for students against COVID-19: Public Health

Students this week returned to the class without COVID-19 screenings, masks or cohorts.

Without these measures in place, Dr. Barry Pakes, Medical Officer of Health for the Region of York, is stressing the importance of boosters as the best line of defence in staying COVID-free as the school year continues.

"I can't stress enough the importance of the COVID-19 vaccine," said Dr. Pakes on Monday. "Now more than ever everyone who is eligible must get their booster dose, or younger age brackets their second dose as soon as they can. With the removal of masks and other restrictions, the vaccine is our only protection against the virus. Ontario data shows that the booster is necessary and has a 95 per cent effectiveness against severe outcomes or hospitalization.

"We are now at over 50 per cent third dose coverage in 30-year-olds and approaching this even in 20-29-year-olds. Thankfully, we are over 80 per cent third dose coverage in some of our older age groups. For children under 12, now is the time to get your first or second dose as screening, masking and cohorts in schools are removed right after March Break. It is critical that every child have the protection against the vaccine."

With mask and proof-of-vaccination mandates lifted in most settings this week, Dr. Pakes once again "encouraged" people to continue to wear the masks, particularly in the "three Cs" - confined or crowded spaces and if you're going to be in close contact with someone in a situation that has poor ventilation or where you're unable to maintain two metres' of distance.

"As of today (Monday), face masks are no longer required in many indoor settings in Ontario," said Dr. Pakes. "However, we know that COVID is not over and that many families will be returning from March Break and we're likely to see an increase in COVID transmission. As a result, while many Ontarians will remove their masks, many Ontarians will continue to wear masks to protect themselves and others. Masks are still required on public transit and in hospitals, in long-term care facilities, congregate care settings and in medical clinics, including our vaccination clinics.

"Please keep a mask with you in your pocket so you can use it when needed, especially around those who are at high risk for severe outcomes of the virus or even just if anyone is uncomfortable with you being maskless. We are happy to be opening our community to support the local economy and to focus on everyone's mental health, but please remember to be considerate of others who may take time to embrace this change and feel more comfortable continuing to wear a mask.

"We continue to see stable levels of hospitalization for COVID-19 in our healthcare facilities with very slow declines. Unfortunately, our wastewater signal for COVID-19 has shown a steady increase, consistent with what is happening across the province. Last week, the Ontario Science Table released modelling data that indicated that we can expect increased transmission and increased hospitalization in the weeks to come. We will continue to watch these metrics as restrictions on mask mandates are removed in Ontario and report these trends to you."

### LOCAL STATS

As of Monday, March 21, Aurora was experiencing 32 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 4,365 PCR-confirmed cumulative cases of COVID-19 in Aurora as of March 14. 4,272 cases are now marked as resolved. There have been 61 fatalities attributed to the virus.

90.1 per cent of Aurora residents aged 5 and up have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 87.7 per cent had received two doses by the start of the week.

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