Vaccines integral in fighting COVID once mask mandates lift: Public Health

Getting boosted will remain the best line of defence against contracting severe cases of COVID-19 once mask mandates lift, according to York Region Public Health.

In his weekly update on the local fight against the virus, Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Office of Health, said that when mask mandates, the ?last population-level measure?, are lifted, it is integral that residents get boosted.

?Though capacity limits have lifted, pandemic control measures such as wearing a mask and screening remain in place,? said Dr. Pakes. ?The Province will be making decisions soon on the mask mandate. The masks are our last population-level measure and once they are gone vaccination will be our only remaining protection. Vaccines are the best line of defence against COVID-19 and avoiding severe outcomes.

?Spring is in the air and so many of us are excited to get as close to normal as we possibly can. The vaccine is our ticket to doing so. By increasing our booster dose coverage, we'll decrease hospital admissions due to COVID-19 and continue to slow transmission, allowing us to move into the spring months more safely.

?As we continue to make the transition back to almost normal, be considerate of other people's comfort levels. The last two years have been hard on us all; everyone is recovering at their own pace and we must be respectful and kind above all else. We're not out of the woods yet and the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. We are optimistic for a positive spring or summer, but we need to remain vigilant as we approach the unknown, particularly looking to the fall.?

Earlier this month, the Province lifted proof-of-vaccination requirements and eliminated capacity limits in both indoor and outdoor settings. This, said Dr. Pakes, has resulted in an ?interesting and challenging point in the pandemic.?

?Our hospitalization numbers continue to decrease slowly, but unfortunately deaths remain stubbornly high,? he said. ?Our wastewater signals are fluctuating but looking stable, but again at a very high level compared to previous waves. We know some people are eager to take advantage of these receding measures [of proof-of-vaccination and lifted capacity limits] while others are uncomfortable and anxious about this change. Either way, please continue to be responsible and kind with one another. Everyone is experiencing a different journey when it comes to easing of pandemic control measures, so it is important to be empathetic and understanding.

?As a result of these changes, we are likely to see a slight increase in COVID-19 transmission but with so many York Region residents having three doses of vaccine, we are hopeful that this will not translate into more hospitalizations and deaths. I myself was in the hospital with an injury over the weekend and while I was able to be treated with excellent care, I certainly saw healthcare staff who are burned out and patients in hallways. This is understandable and expected during a pandemic but it is preventable and we can each do our part.

?Getting a booster dose if you haven't had one is critically important ? even if you are young and even if you are healthy, and even if you have had COVID already. Please remember how COVID-19 is transmitted and how contagious Omicron can be.?

LOCAL STATS

As of Monday, March 7, Aurora was experiencing 19 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 4,257 PCR-confirmed cumulative cases of COVID-19 in Aurora as of March 7. 4,177 cases are now marked as resolved. There have been 61 fatalities attributed to the virus.

89.8 per cent of Aurora residents aged 5 and up have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 87.2 per cent had received two doses by the start of the week.

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