COVID-19 Update

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Highlights

• Yesterday, we heard from the Ontario Science Table that there is an “Omicron tsunami” that will be washing over Ontario, including Waterloo Region, in the coming days and weeks.

• Projections indicate that it will likely be our hardest wave to date.

• This is a disheartening message to deliver anytime, and especially before the holiday season.

• All is not bleak though.

• Every day, we learn more about Omicron. What we’ve learned to date is that, as individuals and collectively, we can take action, we are empowered.

• Although we can’t prevent the tsunami from arriving on shore, we can blunt its most severe impacts, through a combination of vaccination and reducing social contact.

• The Province has issued a “call to arms” for people to get their 1st, 2nd and 3rd doses. With help from many partners across our community, we are ramping up as quickly as possible our vaccination capacity to administer as many doses as possible in the next days and weeks.
  o I recommend residents consider putting themselves on pharmacy waitlists as well. They are many, many pharmacies in our Region who are offering vaccine. Due to the popularity of our Regional clinics, availabilities may open up via pharmacies much earlier.

• As the Science Table indicated though, to effectively blunt the Omicron wave, we cannot only rely on vaccination.

• Given that the number of cases of Omicron is doubling approximately every 2 to 3 days in Ontario now, we must quickly and dramatically scale back our social contacts so that there is sufficient time for the vaccine efforts to have an impact.

• That is why it is crucial that we each all try to do what we can to reduce our non-essential social contacts. If everyone does what they can, it will have a major compounding effect.

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• Reduce your social contacts starting from today and into the holidays.
• To be clear, and to repeat: I am strongly advising members of the public to do two things.
  1. Book your third dose of the vaccine as soon as you are eligible; and
  2. Reduce your social contacts.
• Severe consequences such as ICU admissions and deaths *always* lag a few weeks from when cases arise. Just because the tsunami hasn’t touched down on the shore yet doesn’t mean it’s not a threat.
• If we don’t act now before the tsunami has touched down, it will be much more difficult for us to escape its effects once it has. Not acting before we start to see rapidly escalating ICU admissions and deaths means we will be too late.

**Overall trends**

• Omicron is much more transmissible than Delta and is infecting 4-8 times more people than Delta. It is also doubling every 2 to 3 days.
• We have seen an increasing number of outbreaks in schools.
  o There may be additional cases among students who are now off for the holidays.
  o If students have symptoms of COVID-19, even if they are mild, please get them tested and self-isolate.
  o The Province has provided all students with rapid antigen screening tests to use during the holidays.
• The Province has provided new case and contact management guidance in the face of this exponential growth.
  o Starting in the near future, staff from a provincial workforce will provide the initial contact for all COVID-19 cases as well as testing and self-isolation information for cases to pass onto their household members and high-risk contacts.
  o Following the initial case assessment by the provincial workforce, if a case is associated with a high-risk setting (e.g. congregate care settings, schools, hospitals, etc.), these will be referred to public health units for further contact follow-up.

**Federal, provincial and local response**

• Dr. Kieran Moore, Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health has indicated that he would like a more consistent approach to public health measures across the Province due to the provincial nature of the Omicron spread.
• I am in continued discussions with the Province and medical officers of health across Ontario regarding further measures that may be necessary.
• The Province announced that effective tomorrow at 12:01 a.m., Ontario is introducing a 50 per cent capacity limit to indoor areas with a usual capacity of 1,000 or more, including sports and recreational activities, concert venues, casinos and gaming establishments, rural exhibitions and festivals.
• Also, the Federal government has advised Canadians against non-essential travel to foreign countries to limit the spread of the virus.

Closing remarks
• I appreciate that this is another challenging and uncertain time for our community.
• I would like to remind everyone that we are not defenseless against Omicron. We know how to fight the virus.
• Those who have gotten two doses of the vaccine are still much better protected against severe outcomes than those who are unvaccinated.
• Third doses will significantly boost our immune system’s ability to fight against Omicron.
• We are also not defenseless because we know how to reduce our risk of getting infected with and then spreading the virus:
  o Reduce your non-essential social contact now and during the holidays.
  o Wear a high quality mask that fits snugly against your face and that you can comfortably breathe through.
    ▪ Although multi-layered non-medical masks with a filter layer can be of high quality, medical masks and respirators sold in Canada are required to meet standards for quality and filtration, whereas there isn’t a standard for non-medical masks.
    ▪ For those who want to ensure their masks are high quality in terms of filtration to better protect against aerosolized spread, they can choose a medical mask or a respirator.
    ▪ It’s still important to ensure they’re well-fitting and comfortable enough to wear for long periods of time.
  o Avoid crowded environments and make sure indoor spaces are well ventilated.
  o Take advantage of rapid testing, and get a PCR test if you test positive or have COVID-19 symptoms. Stay home if you are sick.
  o Keep your gatherings as small as possible. Minimize the number of households who gather in-person together.
• Remember, we have the power to fight back against this virus. And the earlier we take action, the more we will blunt the severity of this wave.
• Stay safe. Thank you.