COVID-19 Update

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Highlights

- The Province has confirmed that Omicron became the dominant variant in Ontario last week.
- This “Omicron tsunami” will spread quickly across the province and Waterloo Region.
- As projected by the Science Table, we are seeing our COVID-19 cases rise more quickly than ever before in Waterloo Region, as Omicron rapidly moves through our community.
- Hospitalizations locally have begun to increase, as they have provincially. ICU admissions continue to be stable for now.
- To blunt the most severe impacts of Omicron, I urge all Waterloo Region residents to reduce their social contacts during the holidays.
- Please do not plan large get-togethers and stay within the capacity limits announced by the Province: 10 for indoor settings and 25 for outdoor settings.
- No gathering is risk-free but making your gatherings as small as possible and taking multi-layered precautions can help to make your celebration safer.
- Third doses of the COVID-19 vaccines will also provide substantial protection from infection and serious outcomes.
- There is a high demand for booster doses right now. While the Region continues to ramp up capacity, getting your name on waiting lists at local pharmacies is how many individuals are getting the earliest appointments.
- I highly recommend that people do not turn down Moderna to wait for Pfizer. In fact, in their most recent guidance (December 3, 2021), the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) indicated that:
  - Moderna Spikevax (100 mcg)\(^1\) induces somewhat higher antibody levels compared to Pfizer-BioNTech Comirnaty (30 mcg). Protection against

\(^1\) Dose of Moderna given for first and second doses.

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infection and severe disease from a primary series (dose one and two) with Moderna Spikevax (100 mcg) may be more durable than Pfizer-BioNTech Comirnaty (30 mcg).

- We can all take action to reduce our social contacts and blunt the most severe impacts of Omicron.

**Overall trends**

- Omicron is spreading rapidly because it is much more transmissible than Delta. Case rates are doubling very rapidly because the variant is infecting 4-8 times more people than Delta.
- In Waterloo Region, the 7-day moving average rate of cases per 100,000 is 20.4, essentially the same as the provincial rate of 20.6. We’ve seen a steep increase in cases this month, and have surpassed all our previous peaks except that of our second wave, which we expect will be surpassed shortly.

![Graph showing 7-day moving average rate of new cases per 100,000 by Reported Date]

- The new case and contact management process announced by the Province last week is now in place:
  - A provincial workforce is providing the initial contact for all COVID-19 cases in the province, as well as testing and self-isolation information for cases to pass onto their household members and high-risk contacts.
  - Many residents will also be receiving their information and guidance via email or text (rather than by phone).
  - At this time, Public Health is following up with cases associated with high-risk settings as determined by the Province (e.g., long-term care homes, retirement homes, hospitals).
  - If you are contacted, please follow the isolation requirements.
  - All household contacts of positive cases must self-isolate regardless of their immunization status.

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• Hospitalizations locally have begun to increase (Graph Waterloo Region COVID-19 Dashboard, Dec. 12, 2021)

• Hospital admissions have increased across Ontario by 9 per cent this past week.
• At this time, ICUs are stable.
• It is still too early to estimate the impact of Omicron on our hospital capacity, ICU admissions and deaths, as those indicators lag by weeks.
• In addition, right now, cases are mostly among the younger age groups, and they are the least likely to require hospitalized care.
• We expect those who remain unvaccinated will continue to be the most at risk for ICU admissions and death.
• Even if only a small fraction of infections leads to severe outcomes, since Omicron is infecting so many more people than Delta did before, the total number of those who experience severe outcomes could overwhelm our health care system.
• That’s why capacity limits were introduced. This is why it’s important we do what we can now to prevent Omicron from overwhelming our health care system. Waiting until it does would be too late, and lead to much more suffering, including economic pain.

Guidance on masks

• With the current Omicron risk, it is important to have the best mask fit and filtration possible.
• Optimal filtration can be achieved by wearing a non-fit-tested respirator (N95s or KN95s) or a well-fitted medical mask.
• A well-fitted, three-layer, non-medical mask (such as a cloth mask) with a filter layer can be a reasonable alternative.
• Ways to improve fit include:
  o Adjusting the flexible nosepiece
  o Adjusting the ear loops, and tucking the sides of the mask so that it lies flat
  o Using a mask fitter or brace to help provide a snug fit
  o Layering a well-fitting non-medical cloth mask over the top of a disposable medical mask to improve the fit
    ▪ This will help to push the edges of the disposable mask closer to your face
  o Keeping facial hair and beards shaved or short, if possible, so the mask can fit more closely to your face
• More information about choosing a mask is available on the Region of Waterloo website.

Closing remarks
• I know this is a challenging time for everyone:
  o It is challenging for businesses that have been greatly impacted by the pandemic and are facing capacity limits again;
  o It is challenging for health care workers who are so very tired but continue to care for patients and administer vaccines;
  o It is challenging for families and friends who have lost loved ones during COVID-19; and
  o It is challenging for residents who were looking forward to a different type of holiday this year.
• Omicron has reminded us that this pandemic is a marathon and not a sprint.
• Even a race has a beginning, a middle and a finish line. We may not be at the finish line yet, but we are also not back to the beginning.
  o The fact that 75% of our population has received at least two doses has already prevented far more severe outcomes from occurring.
• We also know what works best now against COVID-19 and its variants.
• Please do what you can to help protect yourself and others – it will be the best gift you give this holiday season.
• Stay safe, and thank you.