COVID-19 Update

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Public Health and Emergency Services
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Highlights

• The number of new cases is slowing; the current Provincial regulations and public health measures are working.
• Public Health Ontario has increased their screening for variants of concern. Three more cases in Waterloo Region have screened positive for a variant, but the specific variant has not yet been identified. This is not unexpected as the number of cases who will screen positive or be subsequently confirmed to have a specific variant of concern is expected to rise across Ontario and in Waterloo Region, as the provincial laboratory network has increased its capacity to monitor for and detect variants of concern.
• Our continued commitment to public health measures is the best way to protect ourselves and loved ones against the spread of COVID-19, including variants of concern.

Overall trends

• Over the last few weeks we have seen the number of new cases slow and move in the right direction.
• This is a strong indicator that the current Provincial regulations and public health measures are working to slow the spread of COVID-19.
• Our weekly incidence rate continues to decrease and is now at approximately 65 cases per 100,000 per week.
• We are currently managing 463 active cases and 31 outbreaks.
• Taking into account interim data, our latest per cent positivity has also begun to decrease and is currently at 3.3 per cent
• Our latest reproductive rate continues to remains at 0.8.
  o Reproductive rates under 1.0 are an indication that transmission is slowing
• Hospitalizations and ICU admissions have come down slightly, but remain high
Return to school

- The Ministry of Education announced earlier this week that Waterloo Region schools will return on Monday, February 8.
- I am supportive of this decision; now is the right time.
- From an overall health and learning perspective, it is best to return to in-person learning when we’re able to do so.
- Over the last week the Province announced additional measures and investments for schools including:
  - Enhanced access to targeted rapid testing, if needed, in situations of concern about ongoing spread
  - Increased access to masks
  - Process for validation of daily screening by secondary students and staff
  - New guidance discouraging students from congregating before and after school.
- Both the existing and new enhanced measures in schools are in place to limit and control transmission within the school.
- These measures are layered and work together to limit the spread of COVID-19 within schools.
- This is supported by our local data, which suggests for children, COVID-19 is often spread through close contact within their household or with social contacts, and that transmission within the school setting occurred much less frequently.
- We are working closely with our local school board partners and testing partners to support their return to school and the implementation of enhanced measures.
- The return to school does not represent a change to the provincial regulations for the emergency declaration or the stay-at-home order.

Variants of concern

- Public Health Ontario has increased their screening for variants of concern
  - We’ve learned that three more cases in Waterloo Region have screened positive for a variant, but the specific variant has not yet been identified.
  - This is not unexpected as the number of cases who will screen positive or be subsequently confirmed to have a specific variant of concern is expected to rise across Ontario as the provincial laboratory network has increased its capacity to monitor for and detect variants of concern.
  - One is the close contact of the first detected case.
  - Two other separate cases have also been identified.
  - All three have a connection to international travel.
  - None of the three cases are associated with an outbreak.
- As Public Health Ontario and the provincial lab system continue to scale up screening and genomic sequencing for variants, we expect more and more cases of variants of concern to be detected in Waterloo Region.
  - Cases confirmed to be specific variants of concern are reported by health unit area on daily basis by Public Health Ontario.
To date, we have one confirmed case of the UK variant.

- Going forward, we will not be able to provide individual-level updates on cases who have screened positive, but we will provide updates on the number of cases confirmed to be a specific variant of concern.

- Early evidence suggests that variants of concern may spread more easily than previous variants of COVID-19 and that there may be the potential for more severe illness.

- Last Friday the Province announced additional measures for returning travellers including:
  - Mandatory testing of travellers on-arrival
  - Enhanced variant testing by Public Health Ontario – this includes screening all positive tests for known variants over the next four weeks.
  - Maintaining current public health and workplace safety measures

- Our continued commitment to public health measures is the best way to protect ourselves and loved ones against the spread of COVID-19, including variants of concern:
  - Avoid social gatherings with those outside your immediate household
  - Limit non-essential trips outside your home
  - Practice physical distancing
  - Wear a face covering
  - Wash your hands often
  - Avoid enclosed, poorly ventilated spaces and crowded places
  - Stay home when you are sick, isolate from household members and schedule an appointment for testing.

Closing remarks

- Your actions are making a difference.
- We can see the impact of the current restrictions and individual actions, in the slowing of our case rates.
- Your efforts have helped to prevent our health care system from becoming overwhelmed.
- Your efforts have helped ensure critical health resources are available for those in need.
- The return to in-person learning does not represent a relaxation of other measures.
- The restrictions and measures are still necessary to continue to slow the spread of COVID-19 and our challenge is not over.
- Thank you for your continued patience and perseverance.