COVID-19 Update

Dr. Hsiu-Li Wang, Medical Officer of Health
Public Health and Emergency Services
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Highlights

- COVID-19 trends in the province and Waterloo Region are slowly decreasing, although we do not expect a rapid fall and may even experience some increases in the shorter term.
- The Omicron sub-variant BA.2 has been detected in our wastewater. This was not unexpected, but underlies the importance of continuing to increase our ‘community immunity’ through vaccination. While BA.2 appears to be more transmissible than previous variants, there is no data yet to suggest that it is any more severe.
- Increasing vaccination rates and following public health precautions has been blunting the impact of the Omicron wave.
- Residents should remain cautious as the Province loosens restrictions, as Omicron continues to circulate at high levels. The Ontario Science Table expects the reopening on January 31 to be followed by an increase in transmission.
- Our local hospitals continue to be under significant pressure. Hospitalizations and ICU admissions may increase as restrictions ease.
- A third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine greatly reduces the risk of serious outcomes and reduces the strain on our health care system.

Overall trends

- We continue to rely on our wastewater indicators, per cent positivity, and trends in outbreaks in high-risk settings as a proxy to monitor local trends.
- Regarding our wastewater signals:
  - The wastewater data up to January 29, 2022 indicates that the rapid decline in the SARS-CoV-2 wastewater signal in the last two weeks may be starting to slow.
The wastewater signal for Cambridge appears to be showing an increase; however, due to inherent variation in the wastewater due to environmental factors, daily and short-term variation in the signal should be interpreted with caution.

The wastewater signal still remains high relative to previous waves and continues to be dominated by the Omicron variant; BA.1 is the primary sub-lineage detected, but there has also been moderate presence of the BA.2 sub-lineage in the Waterloo Region wastewater.

This was expected, based on what we’ve seen internationally, in Canada and Ontario to date. We’re fortunate to have wastewater monitoring now that there is much less PCR testing, to provide more timely information to our residents.

This reinforces the need to continue to increase our ‘community immunity’ through vaccination.

Monitoring in schools and daycares is not showing any concerning trends at this time.

The average daily absenteeism rate for all schools in Waterloo Region for the previous two weeks has been under 13% (12.9% and 12%).

Five schools have reported a daily absenteeism rate of between 20-30 per cent this week.

Hospitals in Waterloo Region are still caring for a very high number of people with COVID-19 at this time. The strain on our health care system is likely to remain high for a few more weeks.

However, we are starting to see the number of patients hospitalized and the number of staff impacted by COVID-19 slowly decrease.

Sadly, we have seen an increase in COVID-19-related deaths in January and expect the trend to continue into February. I would like to express my deepest condolences to those who have lost a loved one due to COVID-19.

From January 1-31 there have been 42 deaths:

- Age ranges: 50’s to over 100 years old
- Median age: 88 years
- The 80+ age group accounted for 71% of the deaths
- Vaccination status: 73% of the deaths were among those who received at least two vaccine doses
- 13 were in LTC or retirement homes
- 57% of deaths listed COVID-19 as the underlying cause while 43% of deaths listed COVID-19 as a contributing cause but not the primary cause.
- While the risk of serious outcomes and deaths remains greatest among the unvaccinated, a majority of deaths recorded will be among the vaccinated as a large majority of the population have had two or more doses especially those in the older age groups.
• The number of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths would be much higher if we did not have high vaccination rates and made efforts to reduce contacts during this Omicron wave.

Provincial updates

• This week the Science Table reported a number of indicators are showing the Omicron wave has plateaued or is in decline.
• They indicated that public health measures helped control this phase, and to expect that relaxation of these measures will increase the spread of COVID-19.
• The size of any resurgence is difficult to predict and will depend on vaccination, the spread of Omicron, and changes in behaviour (e.g., mobility, masking).
• Due to Omicron, admissions to hospitals are at highest levels across all age groups.
• Ontario data shows that vaccination (including third doses) provides strong protection against serious illness.
• Unvaccinated people currently have a six times higher risk of being in the hospital and a 12 times higher risk of being in the ICU compared to people who received two or three doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.
• Increasing vaccine uptake, including getting a third dose, has been and will continue to be critically important to reducing the impact of the pandemic.

Closing remarks

• We need to continue to use the tools that work to blunt COVID-19.
• Please prevent serious illness and get your third dose of the vaccine if you have not done so already.
• If you have symptoms, please follow the steps at ontario.ca/exposed to take care of yourself and to protect others.
• While the Omicron variant remains a threat, I would strongly advise residents to gradually and cautiously resume their activities while following public health precautions.
• Please don’t let your guard down.
• Thank you.