COVID-19 Update

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Highlights

- We are seeing exponential growth of COVID-19 due to the Omicron variant.
- This is already beginning to have a serious impact on our health care system locally and across the province.
- Hospitals across Ontario have been directed to cancel non-urgent and non-emergency surgeries and procedures to cope with the tremendous strain that is expected on the health care system.
- Omicron is also responsible for the Province’s decision to revert to a modified Step 2 for at least three weeks.
- Recent changes to testing and case and contact management mean the number of COVID-19 cases reported by public health units is not going to tell the full story.
- However, hospitalizations and ICU admissions; outbreaks in long-term care, retirement homes and other congregate settings; and waste-water surveillance (for the presence of fragments of the virus shed by symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals) are all strong indicators that Omicron is spreading quickly in Waterloo Region.
- Just as you might hunker down in the middle of a major storm, now is the time for each of us to hunker down to blunt the impact of the wave that is upon us.
- Two important things we can do are within our control.
- We can follow public health precautions and we can get vaccinated.
- Together, these two things reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 and of developing serious illness when we get it.
- We should also do these things to protect the most vulnerable members of our community.

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Overall trends

- Omicron is the most contagious variant yet.
- Local trends are mirroring provincial trends.
- Now that testing is being prioritized only for a subset of our population, our waste water monitoring results will be an important indicator to help us monitor the progression of this wave.
- Dr. Servos and Fuzzen will be presenting a waste water update today. We have an advantage here in Waterloo Region that we have waste water monitoring now that testing is only capturing a fraction of cases.
- In addition to the rising number of hospitalizations, there has been a rapid growth of cases and outbreaks in high-risk settings (e.g., long-term care, retirement homes, and congregate care settings).
- A growing number of health care workers are off sick or need to self-isolate.
- Both Ontario and Waterloo Region are on the ascending curve of the Omicron wave.
- We can expect the highest levels of spread of COVID-19 that we've ever seen in the month of January.
- Some data is reassuring in terms of the reduced severity of the Omicron variant; however even a small proportion of cases among a large number of people infected still translates to a lot of hospitalizations and more patients requiring ICU care.
- Even if only one per cent of those infected require hospital care, the sheer number of those requiring hospitalization can overwhelm the health care system.
- The increasing incidence of COVID-19 in the older population will also drive hospitalizations and impact our high-risk settings across Waterloo Region.

What the public can do

- There isn’t one of us who hasn’t been touched by the pandemic, and now the current Omicron situation may be adding another layer of stress and anxiety to the situation.
- I would encourage members of the public to focus on things within our control that work.
- Vaccines are the key to our long-term success against COVID-19, so please get vaccinated.
- There is evidence that vaccination protects against severe complications of Omicron, especially with a booster dose, and this is very reassuring.
o No matter what your first and second doses were, a third dose of either Moderna or Pfizer will increase your protection from the virus.

o Emerging evidence indicates that Moderna induces somewhat higher antibody levels compared to Pfizer and its protection may be more durable than Pfizer’s, so please do not reject Moderna to wait for Pfizer.

o Even for people who have already had COVID-19, the vaccine offers extra protection and they should get it.

• If you are pregnant, it is especially important that you get vaccinated for the protection of your baby as well as your own.
  o With the rise of Omicron, hospitals are starting to see admissions of infants with COVID-19.
  o Infants are at greater risk because of their immature immune systems.
  o Maternal antibodies can provide protection for the first six months of a child’s life.
  o This is why, starting today, those who are pregnant will be accepted as walk-ins to receive their first, second or third dose of the vaccine.
  o I urge pregnant individuals to get vaccinated, not only to protect yourselves, but also your babies.

• Following public health precautions is also critical even if you are fully vaccinated and have had a booster dose during this time of very high community transmission.
  o Please limit your social contacts;
  o Optimize the fit and filtration of your mask and wear it when around those outside of your household; and,
  o Avoid poorly ventilated and crowded spaces.

Closing remarks

• These are things we can do to blunt the impact of this Omicron variant.
• Employing the “Swiss Cheese model” of using multiple layers of precautions and getting vaccinated and boosted will help blunt the most serious impacts of this variant, including those on our society and health care system.
• Yesterday, Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health reported that countries with good booster dose coverage are faring better against the Omicron variant.
• We have a difficult period ahead of us but we will get through it together.
• Please:
  o Take care of yourself.
  o Stay connected with family and friends.
  o Reach out if you need help.
  o Help others if you can.
• Thank you.

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