COVID-19 Update

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Highlights

- As emergency and mandatory measures are lifting, we are transitioning to managing COVID-19 differently.
- This does not mean the pandemic is over. As long as COVID-19 remains with us, we should not be surprised to see intermittent waves and waning immunity.
- But we have much better knowledge and tools than we did two years ago to fight back against COVID-19, and through our collective actions, we are in a stronger position than we were previously, and have prevented much more pain and suffering.
- The key to us being able to manage COVID-19 differently in the future, to be able to balance reducing the severe impacts of COVID-19 while reducing societal disruption, is for us to use those tools when we need them.
- That includes staying up-to-date with COVID-19 vaccines, staying at home when sick, optimizing indoor air ventilation, and masking in indoor environments during periods of higher risk.
- I also recommend that, as we transition from the winter respiratory season to spring and summer, that we ease our personal protective measures and resume our activities in a gradual manner.

Overall trends

- Our key indicators are much lower than they were at the height of the Omicron wave; however Omicron continues to circulate and, overall, indicators are plateauing.
  1. Wastewater signals:
o The wastewater data indicates that the COVID-19 wastewater signal continues to plateau.
o Regarding BA.1 and BA.2: Up to March 13, the wastewater signal continued to identify BA.1 as the primary sub-lineage, with a moderate presence of the BA.2 sub-lineage. So no significant changes at this time.

2. Per cent positivity:
o Testing volumes have further decreased, and the 7-day moving average of per cent positivity has increased to 12% (up from 8.3% a week prior).
o This is similar to what we are seeing provincially as well (12% per cent positivity).
o At this time, it is difficult to determine what this may mean, given the decreasing testing volumes, but it certainly indicates that Omicron continues to circulate.

3. Outbreaks and hospital capacity:
o The number of outbreaks in high-risk settings is low and stable. There were 5 active outbreaks as of yesterday, including 1 in long-term care and retirement homes, 3 in congregate settings, and 1 hospital outbreak.
o Hospitalizations have declined. As of our latest update yesterday, there were 13 total hospitalizations and 5 in the ICU.

Science Table updates

- Yesterday, the Ontario Science Table presented updated projections:
- They indicated that, overall, indicators have stopped declining, and it is their estimation that hospital and ICU occupancy will likely increase for the next few weeks due to the relaxation in measures.
- A person’s risk of contracting COVID-19 will depend on the number of close contacts, their vaccination status, and the spread of the more transmissible BA.2 subvariant.
- They also indicated that modelling suggests that a third dose offers better protection against Omicron infection over time than two doses (graph below).
Closing remarks

- Please plan to get your booster dose if you haven’t already, even if you have been previously infected. A complete vaccine series, which is currently 2 doses in children, 3 doses in adults, and 4 in long-term care residents and other eligible high-risk groups, is the best defense against COVID-19.
- Public health measures including wearing a well-fitted, high-quality mask can help reduce COVID-19 transmission when people gather indoors.
- I am grateful for having had the opportunity to regularly update residents of Waterloo Region on COVID-19 these past two years.
- I am immensely grateful to our community for strengthening our defenses against COVID-19 over the past two years, including through high rates of immunization.
- COVID-19 continues to be with us, and will likely present future challenges. We can help our community heal and better weather future challenges, by continuing to work together as we have to date.
- Special thanks to the media for sharing important public health updates to help keep our residents informed and safe.