COVID-19 Update

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

• Local trends remain relatively stable.
• With the progressive lifting of restrictions and more people heading inside for the cold season, we should not be surprised if cases rise.
• However, as we continue to increase our community immunity through vaccination, and with residents practicing public health precautions, we can continue to prevent a significant wave of COVID-19.
• A workplace vaccination policy is an important measure that employers can implement to protect their workers and the public.

Overall trends

• Our local case, hospitalization and outbreak trends remain relatively stable.
• With the progressive lifting of restrictions and more people heading inside for the cold season, we should not be surprised if cases rise. We still have approximately 160,000 residents who have not been, or are not yet eligible to be, vaccinated.
• However, as we continue to increase our community immunity through vaccination, and with residents practicing public health precautions, we can continue to prevent a significant wave of COVID-19 that could overwhelm the health system.

Plan to reopen Ontario

• Last Friday, the Province announced their long-term plan to reopen Ontario and manage COVID-19 over the coming months.
• Ontario has outlined milestone dates when certain measures are expected to be lifted if supported by public health and health care indicators, such as:
  o The identification of any new COVID-19 variants of concerns
  o Increases in hospitalizations
  o ICU occupancy
  o Rapid increases in transmission
• Our community successfully pushed back against the highly transmissible Delta variant, and we have been able to bring the spread of COVID-19 under control, through the combination of high vaccination rates among those eligible and continued public health measures.

• I am supportive of a cautious and gradual approach to lifting measures, that is supported by the trends we are seeing in cases and outbreaks, as well as in health care system indicators.

Future Availability of Take-Home PCR Tests:

• I was happy to hear that the Province will offer take-home polymerase chain reaction (PCR) self-collection kits to all publicly funded schools across the province, with a phased rollout starting in mid-November.
  o Under this initiative, students and school staff, in all elementary and secondary schools, will be able to access PCR self-collection kits at school and drop them off at specific locations in the community. PCR tests require processing at a laboratory.
  o This testing option will be made available to both symptomatic students as well as asymptomatic high-risk contacts/exposed cohorts, including students and staff. The intent is to reduce barriers to accessing testing for symptomatic staff and students and individuals in exposed cohorts.
  o This will give parents more choice, in terms of how to access PCR testing for their children. Parents will be able to use these kits or get a test at a testing centre, as before.
  o PCR tests are the most accurate self-administered COVID-19 test.

• We also heard of a “Test to Stay” strategy using rapid antigen tests
  o Rapid antigen tests are used for screening only, in situations where risk of transmission is high. Positive results need to be confirmed by a PCR test.
  o Use of rapid antigen screening in these settings would be for screening in schools that would otherwise have been closed by a public health unit.
  o In such situation, rapid antigen screening would be offered to asymptomatic, unvaccinated students (i.e., not staff) in non-exposed cohorts and who have not been identified as high-risk contacts.
  o High risk contacts, and individuals with symptoms, should continue to access PCR testing and to self-isolate according to Public Health guidance.
  o The testing frequency would every other school day for at least 10 days, up to 20 days.
  o Participation would be voluntary for students in eligible cohorts. However, a minimum of 60% participation of all unvaccinated students in participating cohorts is required for a school to be able to continue in-person learning for all students.

Workplace vaccination policies

• I strongly recommend that workplaces pursue policy options that would facilitate the highest vaccination coverage possible.
• Evidence shows that vaccination reduces the risk of COVID-19 infections and reduces the risk for serious illness and outcomes.
• Vaccines complement workplace controls to protect against the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.
• Employers have a requirement to maintain a safe work environment for their workers.
• A workplace vaccination policy is an important measure that employers can implement to protect their workers and the public.
• For interested employers we have information about vaccine policy development for workplaces on our website.
• The Province of Ontario also has a number of resources to support policy development.

Closing remarks
• The gains we have made to date are the result of the cautious and gradual approach to reopening, so it’s imperative that we keep doing what we know works.
• The months ahead will require continued vigilance as each of us does our part to keep our province moving forward.
• We must stay cautious, never take our gains for granted, and never underestimate this virus.
• The pandemic is mostly impacting those who are not yet vaccinated. Every person who gets vaccinated reduces the risk to our hospitals, our ICUs, our schools and our economy.
• I can’t thank enough our residents who have stepped up to get vaccinated and are continuing to help protect one another.
• Thank you.