COVID-19 Update

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Highlights

- Omicron continues to spread rapidly in the province and across Waterloo Region.
- It spreads much more easily than any other variant of concern so far.
- We need to strictly adhere to what we know has worked before throughout this pandemic.
- We need to continue to follow public health precautions while Omicron remains a threat.
- We also need to increase our protection by getting a third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.
- A third dose has been shown to provide further protection from severe outcomes including hospitalization, admission to the ICU and death.
- Even with the vaccine, the sheer number of people who are getting Omicron means the number of hospitalizations and admissions to the ICU are increasing.
- The most severe outcomes will be among those who are not vaccinated.
- We all need to reduce our social contacts to blunt this wave and to reduce the threat of additional stress on our health care system.
- Thank you to everyone who is reducing their social contacts, following public health precautions, and who has received (or is planning to get) a third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Overall trends

- Omicron is spreading faster than any previously detected strain of the virus.
• Across Ontario and throughout Waterloo Region, we are seeing the number of COVID-19 cases surpass daily records during previous waves of the pandemic.
• You can become infected and spread the virus even if you are vaccinated and have no symptoms.
• In Waterloo Region, the 7-day moving average rate of cases per 100,000 is 62.5, slightly higher than the provincial rate of 59.6.
• In the past week, there has been a significant increase in hospitalizations and more patients are in the ICU. This is increasing the demands on our local health care system.
• Those who are not vaccinated are most vulnerable to serious illness, including hospitalization and death.
• We must do what we can now to prevent Omicron from spreading and from overwhelming our health care system.
  o Please limit your social contacts.
  o Please get all three doses of the COVID-19 vaccine if you are 18 years of age and older.
  o Reduce your own risk and the risk of spreading the virus to others by wearing a well-fitting mask when around those outside of your household.
  o Avoid poorly ventilated and crowded spaces.

Provincial update on testing and case and contact management

Testing
• Yesterday, the Province announced a new testing strategy to ensure those at highest risk of severe outcomes and those caring for them have timely access to COVID-19 tests.
• Starting today (December 31), publicly funded PCR testing is only available for vulnerable individuals with significant medical issues, and residents and staff in the highest-risk settings (e.g., hospitals, long-term care, retirement homes and congregate living settings).
• As a result, most individuals with a positive result from a rapid antigen test will no longer be eligible for a PCR test, and will not be required or encouraged to get a confirmatory PCR test.

Case and contact management
• If you have symptoms of COVID-19, and are not eligible for a PCR test and do not have access to a rapid antigen test, you should assume you have COVID-19. If you are fully vaccinated or under the age of 12 you and your household contacts should self-isolate at home for 5 days.
• For anyone who is not fully vaccinated and has COVID-19 symptoms, you and your household contacts need to self-isolate for 10 days.
• If you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19, are asymptomatic and fully vaccinated, and you do not live with them, you should self-monitor for 10 days but you are not required to self-isolate.
• The Province also indicated yesterday that effective immediately, case and contact management will be completed for high-risk settings only (e.g., long-term care and retirement homes).
• Other individuals with COVID-19 will be asked to inform their close contacts themselves.
• Ontarians can visit Ontario.ca/exposed to confirm if they need to self-isolate, determine if they are eligible for a test, and to find how to inform close contacts of their exposure.

Closing remarks

• I would sincerely like to thank everyone who has taken important steps to reduce their social contacts, to follow public health precautions and to get a third dose of the vaccine.
• A third dose of vaccine will increase your immune response and offer more protection against COVID-19.
• You are also helping protect the people around you by making the choice to get vaccinated and following public health precautions.
• If we each do our part, we can protect our community from COVID-19 and the threat of Omicron.
• Please limit your social contacts this weekend so Omicron isn’t an unwelcome guest at your new year’s celebrations.
• Happy New Year. Be safe.