

Medical Officer of Health: Report to The Board of Health

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Provincial

Due to the decline in key indices throughout the province, the government has chosen to accelerate the loosening of restrictions in Ontario by moving to the next step in the reopening plan. Key indicators such as test % positivity, hospitalizations, ICU admissions, deaths, and outbreaks in highest-risk settings have declined significantly.

Effective February 17, 2022

Ontario will further ease public health measures, including, but not limited to:

- Increasing social gathering limits to 50 people indoors and 100 people outdoors
- Increasing organized public event limits to 50 people indoors, with no limit outdoors
- Removing capacity limits in the following indoor public settings where proof of vaccination is required, including but not limited to:
 - Restaurants, bars and other food or drink establishments without dance facilities
 - Non-spectator areas of sports and recreational fitness facilities, including gyms
 - Cinemas
 - Meeting and event spaces, including conference centres or convention centres
 - Casinos, bingo halls and other gaming establishments
 - Indoor areas of settings that choose to opt-in to proof of vaccination requirements.
- Allowing 50 per cent of the usual seating capacity at sports arenas
- Allowing 50 percent of the usual seating capacity for concert venues and theatres
- Increasing indoor capacity limits to 25 per cent in the remaining higher-risk settings where proof of vaccination is required, including nightclubs, restaurants where there is dancing, as well as bathhouses and sex clubs
- Increasing capacity limits for indoor weddings, funerals or religious services, rites, or ceremonies to the number of people who can maintain two metres physical distance. Capacity limits are removed if the location opts-in to use proof of vaccination or if the service, rite, or ceremony is occurring outdoors.

Capacity limits in other indoor public settings, such as grocery stores, pharmacies, retail, and shopping malls, will be maintained at, or increased to, the number of people who can maintain two metres physical distance.

Effective March 1, 2022

Ontario intends to take additional steps to ease public health measures if public health and health system indicators continue to improve. This includes lifting capacity limits in all remaining indoor public settings.

Ontario will also lift proof of vaccination requirements for all settings at this time. Businesses and other settings may choose to continue to require proof of vaccination. Masking requirements will remain in place at this time, with a specific timeline to lift this measure to be communicated later.

Local

As of Thursday February 17, 2022, there was one individual in the hospital due to COVID-19 and three additional individuals admitted to hospital for other reasons who have also tested positive for COVID-19. Hospitalizations due to COVID-19 of Health Unit residents in the past two weeks have decreased by 90% compared to the prior two-week period.

Our percent positivity is 13.2% (10% Ontario), meaning that about one in every seven or eight people who receive a PCR test get a positive result. This has stayed consistent since our last update 14 days ago.

Sadly, over the past couple of weeks, five individuals have passed away due to COVID-19. The district's total number of COVID-19 deaths during the pandemic is 19.

It is important to emphasize that all risks cannot be eliminated. With loosening of restrictions comes more societal contacts and the risk of virus spread. However, it is important to find the right balance between risks and benefits. At this point in the pandemic with so many people having been vaccinated and so many people having been exposed to the Omicron virus, the benefits of lifting restrictions outweigh the risks. The mental, physical, social, and economic advantages are well described and appreciated. At the same time, continued emphasis on vaccinations and following reduced public health measures will help protect individuals and the health care system.

Continued vigilance monitoring important indicators will help inform decision-making as further lifting of restrictions approaches.

Testing

The Ontario government expanded access to free rapid testing kits to the public for at-home use and are available through participating grocery and pharmacy locations. Disadvantaged populations will have test kits provided through lead agencies working as part of the High Priority Communities Strategy and will be distributing rapid tests through existing local partnerships, such as community centres, community health centres, places of worship, and food banks.

Rapid antigen tests are now recommended for the following:

- **For people with symptoms**
 - A positive rapid antigen test is highly indicative that a symptomatic individual has COVID-19, and the individual and their household are required to self-isolate, in accordance with guidance.
 - If two consecutive rapid antigen tests, separated by 24-48 hours, are both negative, the symptomatic individual is less likely to be infected, and the individual is advised to self-

isolate until symptoms are improving for at least 24 hours (or 48 hours if gastrointestinal symptoms).

- **For people without symptoms as screening**
 - One-off testing (e.g., before a social gathering) by people who are asymptomatic and without known exposure to someone with COVID-19 is generally not recommended. If you choose to use a rapid antigen test in this way it should be completed as close to the event as possible (e.g., ideally within a few hours of the event), and it's important to know that a negative result could be a false negative.
- **For “test-to-work” purposes to meet critical workforce needs in the highest risk settings only**
 - For the public, close contacts should self-isolate in accordance with guidance.

Positive rapid antigen tests do not require confirmatory PCR/rapid molecular testing or reporting to public health.

Vaccinations

As of Thursday February 17, 2022, individuals 12 to 17-years-old who received their second dose at least 168 days ago (which is about 6 months), will be eligible to receive their third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. We are pleased to be able to start offering the third dose to this age group to help protect them from COVID-19 and keep them in school and doing the activities they enjoy. Appointments are readily available, or people can choose to walk into a clinic.

As of Wednesday February 16, 2022, at 3 p.m., 3,950 individuals aged 5 to 11 years have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. This represents 46.6% of the 5 to 11-year-olds in our Health Unit district, which remains lower than the provincial rate of 53.9%.

It is important to have our children vaccinated against COVID-19. Vaccinating children will provide them with a strong level of protection against COVID-19 and the variants.

Vaccination information is available on our website at myhealthunit.ca/KidsCOVIDVaccine. Our Call Centre is also on hand to address any questions or concerns.

The Health Unit is accepting walk-ins at our children's clinics. Parents and guardians who wish to book an appointment for their child can do so online at Ontario.ca/BookVaccine, or by calling the Health Unit Call Centre at [1-844-478-1400](tel:1-844-478-1400).

Website Data Display Update

At the request of our hospital partners the Health Unit's dashboard has been updated to include those currently hospitalized with COVID-19 and those hospitalized due to COVID-19. This provides a more accurate picture of the overall impact COVID-19 is having on the health care system.