

Response to COVID-19 - Update

Date: November 30, 2020

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides a status update of the COVID-19 pandemic locally, Toronto Public Health's (TPH) response work to date, and provincial and local public health measures. As well, it provides an update on the City of Toronto's COVID-19 Immunization Task Force (ITF) planning, results of a community survey on the effects of the pandemic as well as a report on the indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and well-being on Toronto's residents.

On November 24, 2020, Toronto moved into the "Grey - Lockdown" level of the Province's [Keeping Ontario Safe and Open Framework](#) in response to the significant rate of COVID-19 spread. This change adds further restrictions in Toronto, including: gathering restrictions, restricting people from having non-essential visitors inside their homes, closing indoor and outdoor dining at restaurants and bars, closing all indoor gyms, closing hair salons, barber shops, nail salons and tattoo parlours, and closing all retail, including malls, except for curbside pick-up or delivery. Essential businesses such as supermarkets, grocery stores, convenience stores, hardware stores, beer and wine and liquor stores, pharmacies and safety supply stores can be open for in person shopping at 50 per cent capacity.

Earlier in November, the City of Toronto formed the COVID-19 Immunization Task Force (ITF) as part of its pandemic response and recovery efforts. The ITF continues to work to ensure that the City is ready to play its role in helping Toronto residents get vaccinated in order to protect against COVID-19 infection. This work includes preparing for logistical considerations and partnering with community groups to build knowledge and support for the COVID-19 immunization plan. The Ministry of Health has indicated that it is working to establish an information system that can support the logistics of the COVID-19 immunization plan including registration, appointment booking, confirmation of vaccination and inventory management.

The first shipments of the COVID-19 vaccine are expected to be delivered in the first quarter of 2021 and will likely be reserved for provincially identified, higher-risk populations, such as residents of long-term care homes and health care sector workers.

It is expected that vaccines will become available for additional populations in the spring of 2021.

TPH engaged Ipsos Reid to conduct public research to understand how residents of Toronto are managing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This COVID-19 Community Survey was administered online between October 20 and October 30, 2020. The survey includes feedback from 1,201 Toronto residents. Overall, a majority of Toronto residents agree that the city needs to take "whatever measures are necessary" to control the spread of COVID-19 and reduce the number of deaths (90 per cent agree). There is also widespread support (83 per cent) for a second lockdown, if the number of cases continues to rise. Initial survey results can be found in Attachment 1.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the public health measures put in place to prevent its spread, have been increasingly shown to impact mental health and well-being. To understand this further, TPH examined the impacts of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures on the mental health and well-being of Toronto residents. As TPH used data from the first wave of the pandemic to inform this research, TPH is working to update this research with data since the resurgence of COVID-19, and will report back to the Board of Health with its findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. City Council and the Board of Health request the Ontario Ministry of Health to provide resources and funding to adequately prepare for Toronto's COVID-19 immunization plan, including support for required technology, staffing, and logistics.
2. City Council and the Board of Health request the Provincial Government to provide resources and funding to support the community engagement plan being prepared by Toronto Public Health and Social Development, Finance and Administration to support community groups and other stakeholders to build knowledge and support for the COVID-19 immunization plan.
3. City Council and the Board of Health request the Ontario Ministry of Health to ensure that the COVID-19 Vaccine Information System is created in consultation with Toronto Public Health and is a comprehensive and practical system that is simple to use.
4. The Board of Health request the Provincial Government to lead data collection on how people are managing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure representation from those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, encompassing representative data at the public health unit level.
5. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to work with appropriate partners to identify relevant trends from the *Toronto Public Health COVID-19 Community Survey Results* in Attachment 1 and share these findings with stakeholders through community groups and Toronto's 13 COVID-19 Community Cluster tables.

6. The Board of Health direct that the *Toronto Public Health COVID-19 Community Survey Results* in Attachment 1 be forwarded to the Ontario Ministry of Health for information and consideration.

7. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to update Attachment 2, *Indirect Impact of COVID-19 and Associated Public Health Measures on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Toronto Residents*, with data and research from the remainder of 2020 and report to the Board of Health with the findings when the data analysis is complete.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

On November 16, 2020, the Medical Officer of Health delivered a report and presentation to the Board of Health on the Response to COVID-19: Persevering through Resurgence. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL23.1>

On October 19, 2020 the Medical Officer of Health delivered a report and presentation to the Board of Health on the Response to COVID-19: Response to Resurgence. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL22.1>

On September 21, 2020, the Medical Officer of Health delivered a report and presentation to the Board of Health on the Response to COVID-19: Reopening and Preparations for a Potential Resurgence. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL20.1>

On July 26, 2020, the Medical Officer of Health delivered a Supplementary Report to City Council on Establishing a COVID-19 Isolation Site. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL18.1>

On July 2, 2020, the Medical Officer of Health delivered a report and presentation to the Board of Health on an update regarding COVID-19. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL18.1>

On June 8, 2020, the Medical Officer of Health delivered a report and presentation to the Board of Health regarding the City of Toronto's COVID-19 Response and Recovery. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL17.1>

On May 7, 2020, the Medical Officer of Health delivered a presentation at a special meeting of the Board of Health. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL16.2>

COMMENTS

Status of the COVID-19 Epidemic in Toronto

Toronto continues to battle the resurgence of COVID-19 spread through public health measures and restrictions. As of November 29, 2020, the total number of cases in Toronto since the pandemic is more than 41,000. Between October 1 and November 20, Toronto Public Health (TPH) reported 16,630 cases of COVID-19, accounting for 45 per cent of all cases since the start of the pandemic.

Recent Timeline of Provincial and City Public Health Measures

On November 3, 2020, the Government of Ontario released the *COVID-19 Response Framework: Keeping Ontario Safe and Open* document. At that time, Toronto remained in a modified Stage 2 of the Reopening Ontario Act.

On November 13, 2020 the provincial government updated its Framework criteria by lowering the epidemiological indicators' thresholds for each level in the framework. The provincial government then moved Toronto into the Red 'Control' category on November 14, 2020.

On November 23, 2020 Toronto moved into the "Lockdown" level of the Province's *Keeping Ontario Safe and Open Framework* in response to the significant rate of COVID-19 spread. On November 23, 2020, many businesses were closed in Toronto to contain the spread of COVID-19. This included:

- Closing outdoor dining and all patios at restaurants and bars. Take-out, drive-thru and delivery options, including the sale of alcohol, are strongly encouraged to support local businesses
- Closing all indoor gyms and recreational programs, while keeping community centres and multi-purpose facilities (e.g., YMCA) open for permitted activities such as child care services
- Closing all personal care services, including hair salons, barber shops, nail salons and tattoo parlours
- Closing all retail including malls except for curbside pick-up or delivery, essential businesses. Essential businesses such as, supermarkets, grocery stores, convenience stores, hardware stores, beer and wine and liquor stores, pharmacies and safety supply stores can be open for in person shopping at 50 per cent capacity
- Weddings, funerals and other religious services, rites or ceremonies are allowed where physical distancing can be maintained with a maximum of 10 people indoors or outdoors

In addition to the above measures, Toronto residents continue to be strongly encouraged to stay home, except for essential travel, such as for grocery shopping; healthcare appointments; exercise; school; child care; and going to work. Toronto residents are not permitted to have indoor visits with family or friends that they do not live with, including at their homes. Individuals who live alone can have exclusive, close contact with one other household.

Update on the COVID-19 Vaccination Plan

In November, the City of Toronto formed a COVID-19 Immunization Task Force (ITF) as part of its pandemic response and recovery efforts. The ITF continues to work to ensure that the City is ready to play its role in helping Toronto residents get vaccinated. The first shipments of the COVID-19 vaccine are expected to be delivered in the first quarter of 2021 and will likely be reserved for higher-risk populations such as residents of long-term care homes.

On November 9, 2020, Pfizer/BioNTech announced it had successfully completed the Phase 3 clinical trial of its mRNA COVID-19 vaccine. In their trial of 44,000 individuals, the vaccine showed 95 per cent effectiveness in preventing COVID-19 infection, following two doses. These results provide sufficient data to allow Pfizer/BioNTech to submit its vaccine to Health Canada, the Canadian regulator of vaccines, for review and potential approval. Health Canada will determine if the vaccine is sufficiently safe and effective for use in Canada.

On November 16, Moderna, another biotechnology company and vaccine manufacturer, reported preliminary results of their mRNA vaccine, which showed 95 per cent effectiveness of preventing COVID-19 infection, following two doses. Moderna's Phase 3 clinical trial continues. Millions of doses of both of these vaccines have been purchased by the Government of Canada on behalf of the provinces using an advanced purchase agreement to reserve doses of vaccine should they be approved by Health Canada.

The province has announced it is expecting to receive 1.8 million doses of Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine and 800,000 doses of Moderna's vaccine during the first quarter of 2021. These vaccines will be available for initial priority populations as determined by the province. After the first quarter, additional doses of both vaccines will become available for additional populations.

On November 23, AstraZeneca reported preliminary results of its vaccine that showed 90 per cent effectiveness, following two doses.

Toronto's ITF is actively preparing for the logistics of receiving and distributing the vaccines for Toronto residents. The ITF is working closely with the province to meet the unique cold storage and transportation requirements of these vaccines. The ITF is also actively engaged with the healthcare sector to make sure it is ready for vaccination, as many front-line health care workers are a higher-priority population for receiving the vaccine early in 2021.

The provincial Ministry of Health has indicated that it is working to establish a vaccine information system that can support the logistics of the COVID-19 mass immunization plan including registration, appointment booking, confirmation of vaccination and inventory management. It is important that this information system is created in consultation with Toronto Public Health and is a comprehensive and practical system that is simple to use.

TPH and Social Development, Finance and Administration (SDFA) have begun planning for a community-centric vaccination campaign to ensure that many diverse populations

are properly aware of, and engaged in, the COVID-19 immunization planning. The pandemic has had an unequal impact on the health of Toronto residents with some neighbourhoods more heavily impacted. The ITF, with representation from SDFA, is working to leverage the mechanisms and community structures already established to support communities during this pandemic for this new purpose.

Update on Toronto Public Health flu clinics

Each year in the fall and winter months, about 30 per cent of the city's residents gets an influenza shot and TPH reports hundreds of influenza cases. In the 2019-2020 influenza season, a total of 2,771 lab-confirmed influenza cases were reported to TPH, although many more go unreported as cases resolve their illness without testing or hospitalization. In the 2020-2021 flu season, influenza testing continues at elevated levels; yet, influenza activity remains below average for this time of year.¹

However, it remains more important than previous influenza seasons for residents to get the flu vaccine as soon as possible, including at this later stage of the season. A rise in cases of influenza during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic creates additional health risks and health care system complications. As a health consideration, the flu vaccine can protect from an influenza infection or reduce the severity of illness from influenza infection; it may even reduce the need for testing for COVID-19, as the symptoms of influenza and COVID-19 infection are very similar. An overall reduction in influenza cases will also prevent our health care system's capacity from being strained or overwhelmed with additional COVID-19 tests (due to both illnesses sharing similar symptoms), patient visits to clinical settings, and hospitalizations.

It is particularly important for people with an underlying medical condition, who are aged 65 and older, or who are pregnant, to get a flu vaccine due to their increased risk of serious influenza infection complications. Residents can receive a vaccine at one of TPH's four clinics, which are primarily targeted to people in Toronto who face barriers to accessing a flu vaccine, as well as select pharmacies and doctors' offices. By the end of December 2020, Toronto Public Health will also have provided flu vaccine clinics in 60 Toronto shelters to assist in providing immunization against the flu vaccines to those who are experiencing homelessness.

Toronto COVID-19 Community Survey

TPH engaged Ipsos Reid to conduct public research to understand how residents of Toronto are managing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This COVID-19 Community Survey was administered online between October 20 and October 30, 2020. The research includes results from 1,201 Toronto residents. Ipsos Reid set quota targets to obtain a representative sample of residents by gender, age, region, education, and immigration.

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/flu-influenza/influenza-surveillance/weekly-influenza-reports.html>

Key findings of the survey include:

Torontonians recognize that COVID-19 is a threat, but many tend to see it as something that happens to other people: while two in three (64 per cent) see the virus as a risk to Toronto, only one in three (32 per cent) see it as a personal risk to themselves. There is also a widespread perception that in many cases, COVID-19 is manageable: only one in four Torontonians (24 per cent) think they would get 'extremely' or 'very' sick if they were to get the virus, leaving half (50 per cent) who expect they would get 'somewhat' sick, and a further one in four (25 per cent) who think they would not get very sick at all (no significant difference by age).

Overall, a majority of Toronto residents agree that the city needs to take 'whatever measures are necessary' to control the spread of COVID-19 and reduce the number of deaths (90 per cent agree). There is also widespread support (83 per cent) for a second lockdown, if the number of cases continues to rise. Yet, an important minority think the city should not shut down completely: four in ten (42 per cent) agree that strict public health measures like lockdowns do more harm than good. Nearly as many (39 per cent) say we should allow businesses to open or operate as they choose, even if it means COVID-19 cases in the community can increase.

Torontonians have adjusted their everyday behaviour in the face of the pandemic. Besides grocery shopping and going for a walk or run outdoors, fewer than half have continued or restarted any other activity, such as playing recreational sports, going to the movies or working out at a gym. Engaging in some activities is more difficult to avoid, however, as nearly half (48 per cent) are going to the office for work, and four in ten (40 per cent) are using public transit. Mask-wearing is now a widespread habit, with nearly all residents (97 per cent) wearing one in public places (48 per cent) or anywhere outside the home (49 per cent).

Toronto residents present a variety of experiences on their mental health: only one in three (36 per cent) describe their mental health and emotional well-being in the past two weeks as excellent or very good. Three in ten (29 per cent) admit they are suffering, with mental health described as poor or fair. The rest (34 per cent) say their mental health is simply 'good'. When compared to the start of the pandemic, Torontonians are more likely to say their mental health has gotten worse (33 per cent) than better (22 per cent).

A number of stressors are likely taking a toll on people's emotional well-being during the pandemic, including:

- Anxiety about another possible lockdown (stay home/shelter in place): 69 per cent
- Being tired of taking precautions and wanting to get on with their lives: 56 per cent
- Frustration with restrictions on personal freedom: 39 per cent
- Anxiety about health: 66 per cent
- Worries about job loss: 49 per cent
- Stress among parents when thinking about impact of COVID-19 on their kids' education: 77 per cent

Poor mental health is also likely being driven in part by the fact that many Torontonians are now getting less physical activity (42 per cent) and sleeping less (33 per cent) than

before mid-March. The pandemic has caused a net negative impact on both. Among those who consume, there has been a net increase since the start of the pandemic in cannabis use (35 per cent), smoking and vaping (31 per cent), as well as the use of recreational drugs (26 per cent). Toronto residents are as likely to say they are drinking more as they are to report drinking less (23 per cent reported more versus 25 per cent reported less).

Most Torontonians (more than eight in 10) trust the information provided by experts, and express confidence in their local Medical Officer of Health to keep them informed. An important minority are skeptical about the news they see about COVID-19, agreeing that the media 'exaggerates the extent of the outbreak.' When asked about vaccination for COVID-19, three in four (73 per cent) say they would 'definitely' or 'probably' get it, leaving 16 per cent who say they wouldn't, and a further 11 per cent who aren't sure.

Initial results of the survey can be found in Attachment 1.

Indirect Impact of COVID-19 and associated Public Health Measures on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Toronto Residents

The COVID-19 pandemic, as well the public health measures put in place to prevent its spread have been increasingly shown to impact mental health and well-being. The constant fear, worry, uncertainties and stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to long-term consequences for communities, families and vulnerable individuals. The most prominent negative psychological effects include confusion, stress, and anger associated with quarantine duration, infection fears, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, financial loss, and stigma. In Canada, according to the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series survey, only about half of individuals aged 15 and older reported excellent or very good mental health during the COVID-19 first wave period, with stress and anxiety resulting from physical distancing measures being a major concern. A report from the Toronto Foundation from late April also noted growing mental health concerns among Toronto residents.

TPH examined the indirect impact of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures on the mental health and well-being of Toronto residents. TPH used data from the first wave of the pandemic to inform this research. The findings from this work can be used by the City of Toronto and community agencies to inform programming and policies in order to increase awareness and inform potential mitigation strategies. TPH is working to update this research with data since the resurgence of COVID-19, and will report back to the Board of Health with its findings

Mental health help-seeking

The overall daily average number of emergency department visits for any reason declined by 13 per cent during the first wave of COVID-19, falling below what was observed for a similar timeframe in 2019. The drop in emergency department visit volume was more pronounced for mental health-related visits (including visits for deliberate self-harm), with a 24 per cent decrease in the daily average number of mental health-related visits during the first wave of COVID-19.

While mental health and addictions-related help-seeking in the emergency department decreased during the first wave of COVID-19, help-seeking from virtual and telephone supports, including crisis lines, increased, both in large referral agencies and local providers. These providers noted an increase in concerns related to depression and anxiety, in particular around isolation and loneliness, physical health, and availability of services

Children and families

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic also had a negative impact on children and families. For example, a survey of approximately 200 Toronto caregivers (Ontario Parent Survey) highlighted deteriorating parental mental health, including increased instances of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and alcohol consumption since the COVID-19 pandemic started. Caregivers indicated concerns about managing their children's - as well as their own - time, anxiety and/or stress, and household routines. It is important to also note that while some respondents reported deterioration in their child's mood or behaviour, over half also noted positive experiences, including spending more time as a family.

The full summary report can be found in Attachment 2.

Public health communications

TPH recently launched various communications initiatives in order to reach younger people, between the ages of 18 and 40, with public health messaging so that this age cohort is encouraged to take extra precautions as a means to prevent COVID-19 infection. These initiatives include a social media campaign targeting younger adults through a partnership with Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment to feature local athletes and coaches in a series of public service announcements to raise awareness of actions that residents can take to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Strategic public health communications continues to be an important priority in order to maintain the public's continued adherence to public health measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. TPH will continue to use innovative ways to reach residents with public health advice.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 - Toronto Public Health COVID-19 Community Survey Results

Attachment 2 - Indirect Impact of COVID-19 and Associated Public Health Measures on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Toronto Residents