

Response to COVID-19 - March 2022 Update

Date: March 10, 2022

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as of March 2022, and responds to Board of Health direction to report back on the impact of the provincial vaccine certificate program.

Multiple indicators show that the Omicron wave continues to subside in Toronto after peaking in January. While Omicron wave case counts underestimated the true number of COVID-19 cases due to provincial testing restrictions, there has been a decline in the seven-day moving average of case counts and the test positivity rate for tests that were completed. Other indicators confirm this trend. In recent weeks, there has been a decrease in new hospitalizations and intensive care admissions (ICU). Wastewater surveillance has also shown a decline in COVID-19 levels since their peak in January 2022 across most of Toronto's water treatment plants.

The COVID-19 vaccine has proven effective at reducing serious outcomes from Omicron in recent months, with three doses providing the greatest protection. Toronto Public Health, in collaboration with Team Toronto vaccination partners, has continued work to maximize Torontonians' access to the COVID-19 vaccine and has focused its efforts in recent weeks on implementing a data-driven, hyper-local vaccination campaign to promote vaccine uptake in communities with low rates of vaccination. Due to these efforts, a large majority of eligible Toronto residents are now fully-vaccinated with two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, and over half have received a third dose.

There has been a stabilization in COVID-19 indicators across Ontario as well. In light of the current epidemiology and high vaccine coverage, the Province of Ontario (the Province) lifted a number of COVID-19 public health measures effective March 1, 2022, including vaccination certificates, capacity limits, and physical distancing requirements. The Province further shared a plan to remove most indoor masking requirements on March 21, 2022 (with the exception of certain settings including hospitals, shelters and congregate settings, long-term care homes, and public transit), and all remaining COVID-19 restrictions by April 27, 2022. Concurrently, the Medical Officer of Health has lifted a number of COVID-19 orders and letters of instructions, and City Council has

amended the City's masking bylaw, ensuring that it will expire when most provincial indoor masking requirements are lifted on March 21, 2022.

These measures have proven effective at mitigating the impact of COVID-19 through successive waves of the pandemic, but are no longer necessary as a broad public health intervention in most contexts given the prevailing epidemiology. Toronto Public Health will continue to monitor Toronto's local epidemiological context and is prepared to respond, if needed, should circumstances change.

While maintaining support for COVID-19 response, Toronto Public Health is planning for the resumption of public health functions that were paused or scaled back during the COVID-19 pandemic, and developing approaches to address health issues that emerged or were exacerbated as a result of the pandemic, such as mental health, the opioid crisis, and sexually-transmitted infections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that

1. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to review Toronto Public Health functions and services that were paused or reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and report back to the Board of Health in May 2022 with an update on functions and services to be resumed.
2. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to report back to the Board of Health in June 2022 with an update on the development of new approaches to address public health issues and inequities that have emerged over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as issues that existed prior to the pandemic.
3. The Board of Health request that the Medical Officer of Health provide an update to the Board of Health on efforts to build COVID-19 immunization capacity in primary care settings and pharmacies in the second quarter of 2022.
4. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to provide an update to the Board of Health in the second quarter of 2022 on how best to prepare for a potential future surge by employing existing resources to meet other pressing public health needs.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact associated with the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of March 9, 2022, City Council adopted item CC41.1 "Response to COVID-19 - March 2022 Update to City Council" amending Bylaw 541-2020, the Mask Bylaw, as amended by City of Toronto Bylaw 664-2020, so that it expires upon any one or more of the requirements related to the wearing of masks in the Roadmap Exit Step of the Reopening Ontario (A Flexible Response to COVID-19) Act, 2020 being amended, revoked, or ceasing to apply to the City of Toronto. In adopting this item, City Council also affirmed that, even in the absence of regulations requiring mask wearing, City Council supports the ability for residents to choose to wear a mask.

City Council further requested the Medical Officer of Health to continue to engage regularly with the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario to review Toronto's local epidemiology and discuss the use of masks and other appropriate infection prevention and control measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread, particularly in certain settings, such as hospitals and long-term care homes, public transit, and shelters; to undertake consultations with the accessibility community as soon as possible to solicit feedback from people living with disabilities and organizations working with this population about the Toronto's evolving epidemiology and masking policies; to work with the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration on measures to combat the rise of hate crimes including anti-Asian hate as it pertains to masking and other public health measures; and to work with the Province to make PCR testing available to a wider range of individuals at higher risk of serious illness and to put mechanisms in place so that those who test positive have appropriate access to antiviral medications.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2022.CC41.1>

At its meeting of September 27, 2021, the Board of Health adopted Item HL30.1 "Response to COVID-19 - September 2021 Update" and requested the Medical Officer of Health to monitor the implementation of the Province of Ontario's vaccine certificate program and to report back to the Board of Health in the first quarter of 2022 with an update on the program's impact in Toronto.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.HL30.1>

COMMENTS

1. Status of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Toronto

Since the last COVID-19 update to the Board of Health, there has been a decrease and subsequent stabilization of COVID-19 activity across a range of indicators. Understanding that Omicron wave case counts dramatically underestimated the true number of COVID-19 cases due to Provincial testing restrictions, declines in the seven-day moving average number of cases have continued since the peak in the first week of January, reaching 229 as of March 1, 2022. The test-positivity rate, which was monitored as a more stable indicator during Omicron, also peaked in early January and

has declined in recent weeks, standing at 7.6 percent as of the week ending on February 26, 2022.

Given testing limitations, TPH has relied on other epidemiological indicators to track the state of the pandemic. These indicators have further affirmed the decline in COVID-19 activity in Toronto. New hospitalizations and ICU admissions have continued to decline since peaking in mid- and late-January, respectively. Since January, wastewater signals have declined across the City's wastewater treatment plants.

While evidence shows that Omicron is generally less severe than Delta, it can still result in serious outcomes, especially among older and unvaccinated individuals. An analysis of COVID-19 case fatality data for the period between January 26 and February 23, 2022 found that the vast majority (81 percent) of COVID-19 fatalities occurred in individuals aged 70 and older, a larger proportion of which had received at least two doses (57 percent). The data show that a third dose is particularly important in providing an extra layer of protection for individuals over the age of 60, and further reduces the risk of serious outcomes relative to two doses. This finding underscores the ongoing importance of vaccination with a primary series of the COVID-19, as well as a booster dose.

BA.2 Variant of Concern

Toronto Public Health continues to monitor the research and epidemiology of the Omicron sub-variant BA.2. Current evidence shows that BA.2 is more transmissible than the original Omicron variant, however, real-world data from South Africa, U.K and Denmark demonstrate no difference between BA.1 and BA.2 in terms of clinical severity. Immunity from vaccination or natural infection is high within these select jurisdictions. While there have been documented instances of reinfection from BA.2 following earlier infection with Omicron, initial analysis suggest that infection from BA.1 provides strong protection against BA.2. Furthermore, there is no evidence of reduced vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic disease from BA.2.

BA.2 accounts for a small, but increasing, percentage of COVID-19 cases in Ontario and Toronto. The proportion of BA.2 cases in Ontario increased from 6.4 percent between Jan 23-29 to 7.7 percent between January 30 and February 5, 2022. In Toronto, the proportion of cases increased from 6.3 percent to 8.7 percent over that same period. Toronto Public Health will continue to monitor local epidemiological trends and provide additional information or guidance pertaining to BA.2 as required.

2. Team Toronto Vaccination Update

Continuing to increase the number of residents of Toronto who are fully vaccinated is the most important component of the City's strategy to combat COVID-19. As of March 7, 2022, 91.4 percent of the City's residents aged 12 and above had received one dose, and 88.7 percent had received two doses of vaccine. Additionally, 64.1 percent of eligible individuals aged 18 and above had received a third dose of the vaccine. Youth aged 12 to 17 recently became eligible to receive a third dose of the vaccine, if six

months have passed since their second dose, and vaccination data for this age group will be shared in future updates to the Board of Health.

Vaccination rates among Toronto residents aged 5 to 11 have also increased. As of March 3, 2022, 56 percent had received one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and 37 percent had received two doses. In the span of only three months, COVID-19 vaccination rates in this population is approaching a level that took years to achieve for other vaccine-preventable diseases, such as Human Papillomavirus (HPV), which had an overall vaccination rate of 65 percent in 2017-2018, eleven years after the HPV vaccine was first approved by Health Canada.

As the vaccination rates have increased, TPH has shifted its focus and resources to implement a new hyper-local, equity-focused strategy aimed at improving vaccination uptake in 30 communities that continue to experience hesitancy and barriers to vaccination. This has included mobile and pop-up clinics in addition to special event vaccination clinics, such as Vax the East, Shop and Vax, and Vax and Read campaigns, which brought vaccination clinics to shopping centres, libraries, and community centres across Toronto. In addition, the City's VaxTO campaign is reaching out directly to older Toronto residents to encourage them to access their third dose. This phase of the VaxTO campaign will focus on contacting nearly 40,000 individuals aged 50 and older in 13 neighbourhoods with the highest numbers of eligible residents.

These efforts are supplemented by the ongoing delivery of vaccination opportunities through City-operated Immunization Clinics, 548 pharmacies, and primary care offices.

Toronto Public Health is working with its Team Toronto partners to seek new and innovative ways of providing opportunities to access the COVID-19 vaccine. In the coming months, TPH will pilot initiatives to expand COVID-19 immunization capacity in primary care settings and pharmacies, which are key long term channels for the administration of the COVID-19 vaccine. Other future initiatives could include pairing vaccination clinics with other health services that may have been missed during the lengthy pandemic, including clinical services. Integrating these services with COVID-19 vaccination events has the potential to expand access to the vaccine for those who have not yet been able to receive an additional dose but remain susceptible to serious illness if infected.

Approval of New COVID-19 Vaccines

In February 2022, Health Canada approved two new COVID-19 vaccines, manufactured by Novavax and Medicago, respectively. Both vaccines differ from the mRNA vaccines currently available in Canada and provide Canadians with additional choice to protect themselves and others from COVID-19. The Novavax vaccine (Nuvaxovid) is a protein-subunit vaccine similar to the influenza vaccine that individuals get each year. It contains an inactivated piece of the COVID-19 virus that stimulates the body's immune response and makes antibodies and cells that provide protection from COVID-19. The Medicago vaccine (Covifenz) is a particle that looks like the virus to the immune system but is not infectious. The body responds to these particles much as it would when exposed to the actual virus, thereby providing protection from COVID-19.

The Novavax vaccine is expected to be available in Ontario in March and the vaccine manufactured by Medicigo, which could be the first COVID-19 vaccine produced in Canada, is anticipated to arrive in May 2022. Toronto Public Health and Team Toronto vaccination partners will provide further details on how to access these vaccines once supplies are available.

3. Update on Schools

Toronto Public Health continues to support students, parents, education sector workers, Toronto school boards, and schools in efforts to preserve in-person learning throughout the Omicron wave. This has included the provision of COVID-19 guidance and liaison support to school boards and schools, vaccine education and the delivery of school-based vaccine clinics, in alignment with revised provincial direction. As the end of the school year approaches, TPH will review lessons learned over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic to optimize plans to support the education sector in future school years.

Additionally, TPH has adapted other school-based programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on students, including the School Nutrition Program (SNP). Over the course of the pandemic, the SNP municipal grant has continued to reach schools providing in-person learning and has also enabled schools to support remote learners through initiatives like stocking food pantries, extending grab-and-go programs, and engaging in the Food for Kids program, which distributed \$50 food cards to children and youth who were unable to access regular SNP services.

Despite these extensive and impactful efforts to support students, challenges remain. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mental health and wellbeing of children and youth. Research and data has shown that school closures during the pandemic had a negative impact on the mental health of Ontario students. Toronto Public Health is working with education sector partners to develop appropriate strategies to address this important public health issue and support positive mental health outcomes for children and youth. Further information will be provided to the Board of Health in the coming months as additional evidence becomes available and potential interventions are scoped.

4. COVID-19 Policy Updates

At its September 27, 2021 meeting, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to monitor the implementation of the Province's vaccine certificate program and to report back to the Board of Health. An analysis of Toronto COVID-19 vaccination data showed that number of doses administered per day increased by approximately 15 percent in late September and October, following the implementation of the provincial vaccine certificate program. While this increase subsequently tapered off, it suggests that the program had a positive, temporary impact on vaccination uptake in Toronto.

Update on Provincial COVID-19 Measures and Re-Opening

Given the current epidemiological trends and the high rate of vaccination across the province, the Province lifted a number of other COVID-19 public health measures imposed under the *Reopening Ontario (A Flexible Response to COVID-19) Act, 2020* (ROA), on March 1, 2022, including:

- all indoor and outdoor capacity limits, including for all businesses, public gatherings and events,
- proof of vaccination requirements, with continuation of such requirements now being the decision of individual businesses, and
- industry-specific public health measures, subject to conditions.

On March 9, 2022, the Province indicated that given the current epidemiological trends and the high rate of vaccination across Ontario, they would lift indoor masking requirements in most settings as of March 21, 2022. Masking requirements would remain in place for select settings, including hospitals, long-term care, shelters and congregate living settings, and public transit. The Province further indicated an intention to lift all remaining COVID-19 restrictions on April 27, 2022.

Update on Local Public Health Measures

The Ontario-wide decline in COVID-19 activity has been observed in Toronto as well. Given this positive epidemiological trend and in alignment with the lifting of provincial restrictions, on March 1, 2022, the Medical Officer of Health revoked three Class Orders and two Letters of Instructions that were made pursuant to the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, including:

- the Letter of Instruction requiring proof of vaccination for all persons age 12 and older participating in indoor organized sports;
- the Letter of Instruction to employers requiring them to notify Toronto Public Health of workplace outbreaks and requiring compliance with enhanced infection control measures;
- the COVID-19 Self-Isolation Class Order;
- the Class Order to Close Workplaces to Manage COVID-19 Outbreaks; and
- the Class Order for Workplaces Experiencing a COVID-19 Outbreak.

While these policy measures are no longer required, TPH will continue to provide guidance and services to our public including outbreak management in vulnerable settings and vaccination to enable Toronto residents to protect themselves and their community. Toronto Public Health will continue to monitor Toronto's local epidemiological context and is prepared to respond, if needed, should circumstances change.

COVID-19 Bylaws

As of the date of this report, the City of Toronto's temporary COVID-19 bylaws remain in effect, including the Mandatory Mask bylaw (541-2020 and 664-2020) and the COVID-

19 amendments to Chapter 354, Apartment Buildings. On March 9, 2022, City Council amended the Mandatory Mask bylaw in such a way that ensures it will expire when the Province lifts most masking requirements on March 21, 2022. The Apartment Bylaw, which requires the placement of hand sanitizer stations, increased cleaning and posting of TPH signage in apartment buildings, will remain in place until it expires on April 8, 2022.

Notwithstanding these changes, individuals are not precluded from wearing a mask and TPH continues to recommend the use of well-fitted, high-quality masks, particularly in crowded indoor spaces with limited ventilation. Toronto Public Health further encourages people to take other actions to protect themselves and others from COVID-19, including accessing their third dose as soon as they are eligible, practising physical distancing, and participating in activities outdoors, where possible.

Update on Federal Public Health Measures

Effective February 28, 2022, the Government of Canada updated requirements for travellers entering Canada. This includes the removal of the requirement that vaccinated travellers obtain a molecular COVID-19 test to enter Canada. Vaccinated travellers can instead obtain a rapid test, subject to certain conditions. The requirement that all vaccinated travellers be tested upon arrival has also been removed, although some will still be selected at random for testing.

The changes also impact unvaccinated children under the age of 12, travelling with vaccinated adults, who will longer be required to isolate from school, daycare or other public places for 14 days after entering Canada. The Government of Canada still requires travellers who are exempt from quarantine to wear a mask at all times when in public spaces, maintain a list of all close contacts for their first 14 days in Canada, and monitor themselves for signs and symptoms of COVID-19.

5. Resumption of public health services

Toronto Public Health paused or scaled-back a range of public health services in order to reallocate resources to meet the unprecedented demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this action was necessary, it has resulted in underservicing of key public health functions and is responsible, in part, for exacerbating certain public health issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted health inequities that, despite extensive efforts by TPH and other public health and community organizations in recent years, have persisted and contributed to disparities in COVID-19 morbidity and mortality and vaccine uptake. As such, a thorough and careful review of past approaches and interventions is required in order to determine how best to address existing and emerging public health issues. Toronto Public Health has started this work, with the goal of developing a recovery framework and pathway in the months to come, while retaining flexibility and readiness to address any resurgence in COVID-19 in Toronto. In doing so, Toronto Public Health will look to leverage the knowledge, relationships, and, infrastructure developed through COVID-19 response to support this work.

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