

Planning for the 2023-2024 Respiratory Virus Season

Date: October 6, 2023

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of Toronto Public Health's (TPH's) 2023-2024 respiratory virus season plan for monitoring, preventing, and responding to cases of infection in communities and outbreaks in institutions, and collaborating with the broader health system. An equity-focus was included in all planning.

This season, epidemiological data suggests that Toronto will experience a high level of respiratory virus activity. Protective measures to reduce transmission of these viruses such as masking, hand washing, and physical distancing can continue to be used in a layered approach with vaccination, which remains the most effective protection against these agents. For the 2023-2024 fall and winter respiratory season, publicly-funded vaccines will be available to protect against COVID-19, influenza, and for select eligible people, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). Toronto Public Health (TPH) is encouraging residents to get vaccinated as soon as they are eligible.

This report outlines monitoring updates that include the replacement of the COVID-19 Monitoring Dashboard with the enhanced [Integrated Respiratory Disease Dashboard](#) and the integration of influenza and COVID-19 indicators in TPH's Wastewater Dashboard. For prevention, TPH's vaccination campaign encompasses influenza and COVID-19 vaccines, which will be available through many settings throughout the city, and RSV vaccines, which will be available at select locations for eligible groups. The plan also contains a comprehensive 2023-2024 respiratory virus communications plan and an outbreak response component that supports readiness in hospitals, long-term care and retirement homes, and other congregate settings, such as shelters and group homes. Finally, TPH will collaborate with the broader health system to promote the effective and efficient use of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and Rapid Antigen Testing (RAT) and antiviral treatments. To streamline collaboration, TPH has participated in several Ministry of Health tabletop exercises for fall planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

- 1) The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to monitor the impacts of the respiratory season on Toronto residents and report back to the Board of Health in January with a situational update, if necessary.
- 2) The Board of Health request the Ministry of Health to provide \$5.1 million in annual funding for Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) hubs to prevent and mitigate the impacts of outbreaks, particularly in long-term care and retirement homes, and other congregate settings such as shelters and group homes.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

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

DECISION HISTORY

On January 16, 2023, the Board of Health received an update on the respiratory virus season as part of item 2023.HL1.3 "Update on Toronto's Respiratory Viruses Season". <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.HL1.3>

On November 8, 2022, the Board of Health received item HL39.1 "Update on COVID-19 Response and Other Public Health Issues" and requested the Medical Officer of Health to report to the Board of Health in the winter of 2023 with an update on the respiratory season in Toronto, including information on COVID-19 and influenza. <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL39.1>

On November 25, 2020, City Council received item HL23.1 "Response to COVID-19: Persevering Through Resurgence". <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2020.HL23.1>

COMMENTS

Respiratory virus season typically starts in the late fall and continues into early spring. Numerous respiratory viruses circulate and typically spread through respiratory droplets formed when infected people cough, sneeze or talk to people within two metres. It has also been found that some respiratory viruses, including COVID-19 and influenza, can spread through aerosols which can hang in the air for longer periods. Less commonly, transmission may occur when people touch a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touch their own eyes, mouth, or nose. As a result of common modes of viral spread, measures to reduce transmission that became familiar during the COVID-19

pandemic such as masking, hand washing, and physical distancing apply to all these viruses. When available, vaccination is the most effective way to prevent infection.

Throughout Toronto Public Health's (TPH's) 140-year history, protecting Toronto residents from communicable diseases has been a cornerstone of TPH programming. Since the early 20th century, TPH has used epidemiology to identify ways of decreasing public health risks from infectious agents and offered vaccinations free of charge to children in schools. As more vaccines have become available and have been added to Ontario's publicly funded vaccine schedule, TPH vaccination services have expanded beyond schools to include coordination with the health sector for vaccines not provided in schools and more.

This year, vaccines are being made available at no charge to protect against COVID-19, influenza, and for those 60 years of age and older living in long-term care homes, Elder Care Lodges, and some retirement homes, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccine will be made available. TPH is expecting an active 2023-2024 fall and winter respiratory virus season and is encouraging residents to get vaccinated as soon as they are eligible.

There is the potential for an early start to the respiratory season, and a surge of COVID-19, influenza, and RSV activity, along with the circulation of other respiratory viruses. These predictions are based on respiratory virus activity during the 2022-2023 season which started earlier and was busier than previous seasons due to the combined effect of COVID-19, influenza, RSV, and other agents. At that time, case severity was highest in the fall and winter, and in outbreaks among long-term care/retirement home residents and hospital patients (collectively known as institutional settings). While COVID-19 was the causative agent in 77% of Toronto institutional outbreaks, 220 outbreaks were caused by influenza A, RSV, other viruses, or more than one virus. Likewise, recent experience in the Southern Hemisphere demonstrated an early start to the season, and Australia reported higher than average hospitalizations, especially among children.

This report provides an overview of TPH's plan and recommendations for monitoring, preventing, and responding to cases of respiratory infection in communities and outbreaks in institutions, and collaborating with the broader health system, based on the expected viral activity described above. An equity-focus was included in all planning. As part of the planning process, a TPH planning task group met throughout the summer, and TPH staff participated in several fall respiratory planning table-top exercises with health system and other local partners, documenting key observations and insights to inform planning activities.

Monitoring

Surveillance and Evidence

TPH is continuing to actively monitor and report on respiratory diseases in Toronto. After more than three years of COVID-19-specific monitoring, and reduced COVID-19 morbidity, reporting is transitioning to a comprehensive approach for seasonal respiratory diseases. This change is in line with COVID-19 becoming a more routine respiratory threat, and the integration of the COVID-19 response with programming for other communicable diseases. Increased integration of reporting is also being seen in

other Ontario jurisdictions. Updates for the 2023-2024 season include the launch of the enhanced [Integrated Respiratory Disease Dashboard](#), replacing the COVID-19 Monitoring Dashboard. This dashboard will be updated weekly throughout the respiratory virus season and will include indicators on COVID-19, influenza, and other seasonal respiratory diseases.

Wastewater surveillance became an important source of information for COVID-19 activity once eligibility for confirmatory lab testing was reduced to only those at highest risk of severe disease. Wastewater surveillance will be expanded to include influenza and will be reflected in a scheduled refresh of TPH's Wastewater Dashboard. As of October 16th, this information will be summarized through an interactive tool that includes influenza and COVID-19 surveillance.

Prevention

Vaccines

This fall, there are vaccines available to protect against COVID-19, influenza, and for select eligible people, RSV. TPH encourages residents to get vaccinated as soon as they are eligible. Most Toronto residents will receive these vaccines through their primary care provider or the 750 pharmacies offering influenza vaccine, 550 of which offer both COVID-19 and influenza vaccines.

COVID-19 and influenza vaccines will be available through a phased approach with availability for high-risk populations first, followed by the general public, all of whom may receive both vaccines at the same time. TPH will be administering COVID-19 and influenza vaccines through the following immunization programs until December 31, 2023:

- Four City-run immunization clinics:
 - Beginning end of September for high-risk individuals
 - Starting October 30th for the general public
- Mobile Clinics: Beginning early October, TPH is providing vaccines via mobile clinics to communities and neighbourhoods selected using an equity lens such as: shelters and drop-in centres for the homeless/underhoused, naturally occurring retirement communities, and newcomers' facilities.
- Homebound individuals will be eligible to receive vaccines through Toronto Paramedic Services.

Ontario is also rolling out its first publicly funded vaccination program of the RSV vaccine for those 60 years and older living in long-term care homes, Elder Care Lodges, and some retirement homes. While this vaccine will not be available at TPH clinics, TPH will promote this vaccine for eligible individuals. More information on this new vaccine program will be available from the Ministry of Health later in the fall.

TPH will continue to promote staff COVID-19 and influenza vaccination through our internal "Fight the Flu & COVID-19 2023" immunization campaign. In addition, TPH will

also support immunization of health care workers in Toronto health care facilities through the provision of promotional campaign materials to Toronto hospitals and long-term care homes.

Communications Plan

TPH has developed a comprehensive 2023-2024 Respiratory Virus Communications Plan. It provides a high-level and integrated approach to raising awareness among key audiences about upcoming respiratory virus activity from fall 2023 to early spring 2024 and the steps people can take to reduce transmission and help keep themselves, their loved ones, and their communities safer.

Responding to Outbreaks

Outbreak Preparedness and Management in Institutions

There are several TPH programs that support respiratory virus response readiness in hospitals, long-term care and retirement homes, and other congregate settings, such as shelters and group homes. These programs work collaboratively to develop and implement fall outbreak preparedness activities, including:

- Organizing and hosting the 2023 Fall Preparedness Kick Off Event virtual conference (June 2023) which was attended by long-term care and retirement home facility leads, and staff from the infection prevention and control (IPAC) Hubs, Public Health Ontario, and TPH.
- Participating in IPAC audits of long-term care and retirement homes which were led by hospital IPAC teams and IPAC Hubs.
- Gathering relevant resources and compiling a fall outbreak preparedness tool kit which was shared with facilities to help prepare them for the upcoming fall respiratory outbreak season.
- Sharing vaccine ordering information, as needed.
- Providing promotional material (posters, stickers, immunization cards, and cart flags) to relevant institutions.
- Conducting internal training/refreshers for TPH staff.
- Developing a post-respiratory outbreak season feedback survey for hospitals and long-term care and retirement homes to be shared in the spring of 2024.
- Ensuring timely distribution of relevant Ministry of Health directives and guidance documents.
- Continuing to provide ongoing outbreak management support including implementing outbreak control measures, facilitating laboratory testing, and providing consultation on case and contact management.

TPH continues to work closely with IPAC Hubs established by the Ministry of Health early in the COVID-19 pandemic. In Toronto, the IPAC Hubs are based in hospitals and include IPAC physicians and infection control practitioners who work collaboratively with TPH staff and representatives from long-term care and retirement homes, and other congregate settings such as shelters and group homes. IPAC Hubs help build knowledge and expertise, support development of IPAC programs, enhance capacity to respond, provide advanced IPAC and clinical advice, and help ensure these institutions can better respond to respiratory virus outbreaks. IPAC Hubs are an important new

support for outbreak response and for capacity building in institutions. It is recommended that the Board of Health request the Ministry of Health to maintain consistent, adequate funding of \$5.1 million annually for IPAC hubs so that they can continue to provide these important services at the high-level that has been achieved.

Equity Considerations

Indigenous Strategy

Working with Indigenous service providers and strengthening TPH's relationships through reconciliation is an organizational commitment identified in the Toronto Indigenous Health Strategy and the City of Toronto Reconciliation Action Plan. In preparation for the upcoming viral respiratory season, TPH has been working with local Indigenous organizations and offered:

- Information on fall planning
- Temporary influenza or COVID-19 vaccination clinics in partnership with Indigenous organizations
- Regular updates on influenza and COVID-19, including vaccination clinics in Toronto locations and relevant National Advisory Committee on Immunization, Ministry of Health, and Ontario Health vaccine guidance
- Information regarding the provincial plans for the newly approved RSV vaccine

TPH is committed to ongoing partnership and collaboration with Indigenous service providers to address population health priorities, as identified by the Indigenous community.

Accessibility

Throughout the pandemic, TPH has taken steps to ensure that information, vaccinations, testing, and treatment are accessible to all residents. Fall preparations reflect TPH's commitment to supporting all individuals who seek to access public health programs and services and include:

- Clinic accessibility: all City-run vaccine clinics are fully accessible with parking near the entrance, ramps, elevators, and wheelchairs. Clients bringing a care provider or service animal with them will be accommodated, and there are privacy rooms available upon request. Individuals may request accommodation ahead by completing the [Vaccine Accommodation Request Form](#) or calling Toronto Health Connections.
- Staff training: TPH clinic staff are trained on:
 - Supporting inclusion and accessibility at mass immunization sites
 - Tips for inclusive and accessible service
 - An accessibility audit checklist
 - How to work with clients with accommodation requirements.
- Public-facing communication channels: all public-facing channels have been reviewed for accessibility. For example, the City's website complies with Web Accessibility Guidelines and is a key source of all COVID-19 information. It includes information on accessibility at each City-run clinic, as well as transportation options to clinics for those who require assistance.

- Homebound vaccinations: TPH supports our colleagues in Toronto Paramedic Services to provide COVID-19 and influenza vaccines to homebound individuals.

Schools

The TPH School Health Team works actively with school boards, administrators, staff, students, parents and caregivers to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, including respiratory viruses, in Toronto school communities. Programming to empower staff, students, and families to prevent respiratory illness includes:

- Widely distributing back to school letters to principals in publicly funded schools and independent/private schools that focus on reducing the spread of respiratory viruses and communicable diseases in school settings
- Disseminating letters to parents/guardians to communicate concrete actions families can take to protect themselves as respiratory virus activity increases this fall, such as getting vaccinated, using a high-quality mask in crowded indoor settings with poor ventilation, and staying home if they have symptoms of illness
- Webinar presentations for school principals by TPH associate medical officers of health with updates about the fall respiratory virus season, protective vaccines, masking recommendations and access to Rapid Antigen Tests
- Presentations by public health nurses, aimed at school staff and parents, with information about infection prevention and control, vaccination and reducing virus spread
- Support to schools from Liaison Public Health Nurses and from the [Healthy Schools Toolkit website](#) and [Respiratory Virus Guidance for Publicly Funded and Independent Schools](#) website, with information, curriculum resources and tool kits that can be used by school staff with students

Broader Health System Collaboration

While not the system lead for testing and therapeutics, TPH will play several important roles in these areas during the 2023-2024 respiratory virus season. In addition, new this year, Ontario's Ministry of Health developed "Respiratory Exercise Packages" which included resources to help strengthen fall preparedness activities for public health units, Ontario Health (OH), the health sector, provincial emergency partners, and other stakeholders. TPH participated in a number of exercises with health sector partners which resulted in several lessons learned that will strengthen this season's response.

TPH's Role in Testing

1) TPH will provide recommendations for respiratory virus testing during institutional respiratory outbreaks following the guidance provided by the Ministry of Health and Public Health Ontario (PHO). TPH staff work closely with institutions experiencing respiratory outbreaks to ensure testing of initial clinical cases is conducted promptly through the Public Health Ontario Laboratory (PHOL).

2) TPH is increasing public access to free COVID-19 Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs). RAT kits are available at City Civic Centres (Etobicoke Civic Centre, Scarborough Civic Centre, North York Civic Centre, East York Civic Centre), Metro Hall, City Hall, and TPH Clinics (i.e., mass immunization clinics, and dental, sexual health, and breastfeeding

clinics). For a list of locations, please see [COVID-19: Testing – City of Toronto](#). TPH is piloting a program for various organizations (e.g., universities, colleges, sexual health clinics) to order RAT kits through our Condom Distribution Program. In addition, we are collaborating with Toronto Public Libraries to make RAT kits available at 100 library sites this month. Health care providers can access RATs directly from the Ministry of Health to distribute to their patients at no charge. RATs will be available as long as supplies last.

3) TPH is communicating testing recommendations and information about RAT access to the public through:

- Web pages:
 - TPH has a centralized web page to provide a list of Toronto locations where the public can access RATs. This will be followed by the creation of an online RAT kit map locator tool so that residents can easily find the facility nearest to them offering RATs.
 - TPH is communicating information on community-based PCR testing offered at community pharmacies, including the [PCR locator tool](#).
- Digital and social media posts
- Posters at City locations
- Engagement with community partners by email to amplify communications
- TPH will also continue to communicate testing recommendations with Toronto health care providers.

TPH's Role in Therapeutics

TPH provides influenza treatment information, including clinical guidelines for health care providers, on its public and health professional websites and through the Communiqué newsletter for health professionals. In addition, when assisting institutions to manage influenza outbreaks, TPH communicable disease investigators make recommendations on the use of influenza antivirals, in accordance with provincial guidance, to manage the outbreak effectively.

COVID-19 treatment continues to be available for high-risk individuals to lower the risk of serious illness and hospitalization due to COVID-19 infection. TPH collaborates with Ontario Health - Toronto Region to promote and amplify messaging for the public and health care providers regarding eligibility and access to treatment.

Collaborative Tabletop Exercises

Each public health unit was asked to participate in at least one tabletop-exercise and report findings back to the Ministry of Health. These tabletop exercises brought together key staff in a collegial and safe environment to discuss how they would respond to different respiratory virus transmission and outbreak scenarios. Participation helped to validate roles and responsibilities within and between organizations, identify and mitigate gaps ahead of the beginning of the fall respiratory virus season, validate plans for coordination and communication, and identify organizational connections and linkages. TPH participated in five exercises: one internal exercise and four external exercises which included a variety of stakeholders such as hospitals, long-term care homes, primary care providers, and Ontario Health Teams. Lessons learned included

the need to enhance processes to maintain relationships with partners established during the pandemic, and a need for communication and collaboration across the health system to be proactive, frequent, consistent, and coordinated when planning and implementing respiratory season activities.

Next Steps

It is recommended that staff report back to the Board of Health in January 2024 with an update if the respiratory situation changes significantly from how it is described in this report and an update to the Board of Health is warranted.

During this fall and winter, and the respiratory seasons to come, TPH, the Ministry of Health, Ontario Health, Ontario Health Teams, and other partners have a unique opportunity to leverage lessons learned from the pandemic to continue to strengthen our collective seasonal response.

As TPH and partners across the public health and health sectors implement the plans described in this report, additional data and lessons will be generated for continued improvements for future preparations.

CONTACT

Dr. Michael Finkelstein, Deputy Medical Officer of Health, Toronto Public Health, 416-392-1784, Michael.Finkelstein@toronto.ca

Dr. Irene Armstrong, Associate Medical Officer of Health, Toronto Public Health, 416-338-7993, Irene.Armstrong@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Dr. Eileen de Villa
Medical Officer of Health