

Toronto Public Health Preparations for the 2024-2025 Respiratory Virus Season

Date: October 8, 2024

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of Toronto Public Health's (TPH) 2024-2025 respiratory virus season plan for preventing and monitoring cases of respiratory infection in the community and responding to outbreaks in institutions such as long-term care homes and hospitals. There are some updates to this year's plan highlighting where TPH has returned to routine response activities coming out of the pandemic. TPH continues to embed an equity-focused approach throughout its planning and programs.

As is usually seen each year, there is an anticipated increase in the spread of respiratory viruses and illness in the fall and winter season. Recommended protective measures to reduce transmission of these viruses such as masking, hand washing, and staying home when sick can be used in a layered approach. These can be combined with vaccination, which remains the best way to protect yourself from vaccine-preventable viruses.

For the 2024-2025 respiratory illness season, publicly-funded vaccines will be available to protect against COVID-19, influenza (flu), and for select eligible people, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). New this fall, an infant RSV vaccine is publicly-funded to protect vulnerable young children from this illness. An updated COVID-19 vaccine will be available as well. TPH encourages eligible residents to get vaccinated as soon as the vaccines are available and in keeping with the latest guidance provided by the National Advisory Committee on Immunization.

TPH is also monitoring and responding to an increase in pertussis (whooping cough) and pneumococcal infections, highlighting the increased importance for population preventative measures such as hand washing, masking, vaccination, and staying home when sick. TPH has initiated communication to the public and health care providers alerting them to this increase and to remind them of the importance of vaccination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health request the Ministry of Health to confirm ongoing sufficient funding support 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.
2. The Board of Health request the Ministry of Health to provide \$5.2 million in funding to Toronto Public Health over 24 months to enable Toronto Public Health to promote and support the delivery of the RSV vaccine effectively and equitably.
3. The Board of Health request the Ministry of Health to support local efforts for timely and representative wastewater surveillance for the presence of key respiratory pathogens (such as SARS-CoV-2, RSV, and influenza).

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Toronto Public Health will request budget adjustment later based on the Ministry of Health's decision on the request of \$5.2 million funding to Toronto Public Health over 24 months to promote and support the delivery of the RSV vaccine.

Funding to support IPAC hubs from the Ministry of Health does not go through Toronto Public Health. There are no financial impacts associated with the recommendations that request the Ministry of Health to confirm ongoing sufficient funding support for IPAC hubs and request the Ministry of Health to support local efforts for timely and representative wastewater surveillance for the presence of key respiratory pathogens, in current and future years.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has been advised of the financial impacts associated with these programs to be considered along with other priorities in future budget processes.

DECISION HISTORY

On January 15, 2024, the Board of Health received an update on the respiratory virus season as part of item 2024.HL9.4 Update on the 2023 to 2024 Respiratory Virus Season. <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.HL9.4>

On October 23, 2023, the Board of Health received item 2023.HL7.1 Planning for the 2023 to 2024 Respiratory Virus Season and advocated to the Ministry of Health for annual funding for Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) hubs to prevent and mitigate impacts of outbreaks in congregate settings.
<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.HL7.1>

COMMENTS

Introduction

Respiratory virus season typically starts in the fall and continues into early spring. Numerous respiratory viruses circulate and typically spread through respiratory droplets formed when infected people cough, sneeze or talk. While respiratory droplets generally transmit illness from person to person within a distance of 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, recommended measures to reduce transmission that became familiar during the COVID-19 pandemic such as masking, hand washing, and staying home when sick apply to all these viruses. When available, vaccination is the most effective way to prevent infection.

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 (e.g., long-term care homes (LTCHs) and hospitals), 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 exercises with health system and other local partners.

Epidemiological Monitoring

Surveillance and Evidence

TPH's response during the respiratory season will be informed by respiratory virus trends related to morbidity, mortality, and outbreak activity in Toronto. TPH will routinely monitor and report on detailed outbreak data from institutions, reported fatalities, lab percent positivity and wastewater trends. These indicators will be summarized in the TPH weekly integrated respiratory disease dashboard, which is scheduled to restart later in the fall.

There were important changes to the respiratory disease surveillance landscape in spring and summer of 2024. The provincial government decommissioned the COVID-19 case and contact management system (CCM) as of June 28, 2024, and public health units were no longer required to enter community case details for COVID-19. This has reduced the ability to assess and report on COVID-19 case incidence, morbidity, and mortality.

Additionally, the Province of Ontario announced the cancellation of their wastewater surveillance initiative, which had been a key part of the respiratory disease surveillance framework in Toronto. However, the National Microbiology Lab (NML) is testing Toronto wastewater (as the only Ontario site in their national program), albeit with reduced

sampling frequency and a different methodology. TPH is still assessing the best way to use and interpret this new data source.

Seasonal Respiratory Illness Prevention and Response

Vaccines

This fall, there are updated vaccines available to protect against COVID-19, influenza, and for select eligible people, RSV. TPH encourages eligible residents to get vaccinated as soon as the vaccine is available. Promoting and administering COVID-19 and RSV vaccinations, in addition to the annual influenza vaccine program, are additional campaigns added to the TPH fall respiratory response, requiring further resources and collaboration to ensure all eligible populations are reached effectively and efficiently. Most Toronto residents will receive these vaccines through their primary care provider or the approximately 700 pharmacies offering the influenza vaccine, 575 of which offer both COVID-19 and influenza vaccines.

In keeping with provincial direction, updated COVID-19 and influenza vaccines will be available through a phased approach with availability for high-risk populations first, followed by the general public. Both vaccines can be received at the same time. TPH will be administering COVID-19, influenza (flu) and pneumococcal vaccines at various homeless and underhoused clinics, and with select partners serving Indigenous communities. Homebound individuals will be eligible to receive COVID-19 and Influenza (flu) vaccines through Toronto Paramedic Services. COVID-19 vaccines will be provided to young children six months to four years of age at TPH clinics and participating pharmacies and primary care locations. Additional resources would allow TPH to support RSV vaccination efforts to ensure effective and equitable distribution.

Ontario is rolling out the second year of the publicly-funded RSV vaccination program for those 60 years of age and older living in long-term care homes and Elder Care Lodges. New this year, all residents of retirement homes who are 60 years of age and older are eligible for publicly-funded vaccine as well. Anyone who received the vaccine last year does not need another dose this year. While this vaccine will not be available at TPH clinics, TPH will promote this vaccine for eligible individuals. [More information on this new vaccine](#) is available from the Ministry of Health.

Also new this year, Ontario is providing an RSV immunization to all infants and high-risk children. The new immunization is a monoclonal antibody, which is used to prevent a serious lower respiratory tract infection caused by RSV in infants and young children. It will be administered to newborns before they are discharged from hospital to provide protection during the RSV season. Pregnant individuals, in consultation with their health care provider, can also choose to receive an RSV vaccine (at 32 to 36 weeks of gestation), instead of having their newborn receive the monoclonal antibody at birth. More information on the RSV vaccine is available on [TPH's website](#).

Outbreak Preparedness and Mitigation in Institutions

Several TPH programs support respiratory virus response readiness in hospitals, long-term care and retirement homes, and other congregate settings, such as shelters and

group homes. Programs work collaboratively to develop and implement fall outbreak preparedness activities, including:

- Working closely with the provincially-funded IPAC (Infection Prevention and Control) Hubs through participating in IPAC outbreak preparedness visits of long-term care and retirement homes;
- Attending IPAC Hub community of practice meetings to deliver outbreak preparedness messaging to all long-term care and retirement home stakeholders;
- Gathering relevant resources and compiling a fall outbreak preparedness tool kit that is shared with facilities;
- Sharing vaccine ordering information, as needed;
- Providing promotional influenza, RSV and COVID-19 vaccine campaign material to relevant institutions;
- Ensuring timely distribution of relevant Ministry of Health directives and guidance documents;
- Distributing the TPH monthly IPAC newsletter to all long-term care and retirement homes, and use the content for IPAC updates to Toronto hospitals; and
- Continuing to provide ongoing outbreak management support including guidance on implementing outbreak control measures, facilitating laboratory testing and providing consultation on case and contact management.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health established IPAC (Infection Prevention and Control) Hubs. 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 to cases and outbreaks, provide advanced IPAC and clinical advice, and help ensure these institutions can better respond to respiratory virus outbreaks.

In March 2024, the Province confirmed continued funding of the IPAC Hubs in the 2024-25 fiscal year; this means that the IPAC Hubs will be able to continue their infection prevention and control support in congregate living settings, such as shelters, long-term care and retirement homes, and the years following. While the province has indicated that it will provide funding support for IPAC Hubs beyond the 2024-25 fiscal year, the specifics of such funding have not yet been determined or communicated and will be part of a longer-term funding model for the hubs. To fully support the role of IPAC hubs and allow for long-term planning, the province should confirm a sustainable funding model.

Schools

With the ending of the provincial government's funding allocation for the School-Focused Nurses Initiative, TPH's School Health Team continues to protect school communities by working actively with school boards, administrators, staff, students, parents, and caregivers to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, including respiratory viruses, in Toronto schools. Initiatives include:

- Distributing back-to-school letters to principals in publicly funded schools and independent and private schools that include information on reducing the spread of respiratory viruses and communicable diseases in school settings;

- Sharing information with parents, guardians and caregivers to communicate actions families can take to protect themselves as respiratory virus activity increases this fall;
- Promoting the online [Healthy Schools Toolkit](#) and Reduce Respiratory Virus Spread Guide [webpage](#), with information, curriculum resources and tool kits that can be used by all school staff with students; and
- Providing Public Health Nurse support for schools e.g., presentations aimed at school staff and parents, newsletter and social media content, and curriculum support with information about IPAC, vaccination and reducing virus spread.

In the event of exposure to communicable diseases that warrant investigation and further public health action, TPH works closely with school communities and school boards to facilitate communication and collaborative planning.

Promoting Protection: Communications Plan

TPH has developed a comprehensive, multi-channel communications strategy aligned with Ontario Ministry of Health guidance and TPH's Strategic Plan 2024-2028. The city-wide public education campaign includes a mix of digital and print media, and partnerships with community and health care partners, to maximize reach to our diverse audiences in Toronto. Key themes for the 2024-2025 campaign include vaccination, how to protect yourself, what to do when you're sick, testing and COVID-19 treatment, and targeted health care provider communications.

TPH will promote staff COVID-19 and influenza (flu) vaccination through internal communications. 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.

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 has offered:

- Information on fall planning;
- Influenza and 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; and
- 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.

Broader Health System Collaboration

While not the system lead for testing and treatment, TPH will play several important roles in these areas during the 2024-2025 respiratory virus season. Ontario's Ministry of Health developed "Respiratory Exercise Packages" which include resources to help strengthen fall preparedness activities for public health units, Ontario Health, 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 will collaborate with the broader health system to promote the effective and efficient use of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing, Rapid Antigen Testing (RAT) and antiviral treatments.

TPH has launched an Ontario Health Team (OHT) Engagement Initiative to explore opportunities for collaboration with the nine OHTs across Toronto, focusing on illness prevention and health promotion. As part of this initiative, TPH is actively working with OHTs in preparing for the fall respiratory virus season by providing them with information and resources. This collaborative effort includes working with various health sectors partners within each OHT to support a comprehensive and coordinated approach to respiratory virus prevention and illness management and prevention across the city.

Toronto Public Health Strategic Impact

The work of fall respiratory planning aligns with and advances the [Toronto Public Health Strategic Plan 2024-2028](#) through the following priorities and objectives:

Priority 1: Strengthen health protection, disease prevention, and emergency preparedness, and the following objectives:

- a. Prepare for and respond to outbreaks and public health emergencies informed by best evidence and lessons learned from previous responses.
- b. Enhance emergency preparedness and response infrastructure.
- c. Effectively communicate with the public about how they can protect their health.

Priority 4: Advocate to advance health equity and the following objectives:

- a. Assess and report on health inequities and population health needs.
- b. Collaborate with partners across multiple sectors to address local health needs.
- c. Share evidence, advocate, and collaborate to influence actions that impact population health.

Next Steps

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 to enhance future preparations for seasonal response.

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SIGNATURE

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