Update on COVID-19
Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health
May 20, 2020 at 3:45 p.m.
Members' Lounge, Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

- Good afternoon. Today there are 263 new COVID-19 infections in Toronto. To date, 6,735 people have recovered, an increase of 119 since yesterday. For more detailed data on the status of COVID-19 cases in our city, please visit our website.

- I would like to take a moment to address the recent increases in our local COVID-19 cases. My team reviewed our data and confirmed that there was an increase in the volume of lab tests we received over the past two days. Of note, there was an increase in our daily COVID-19 case counts in long-term care homes associated with increased testing that was being done in these settings to detect the virus sooner.

- Further analysis of these data gives us a better picture of our local situation and shows that our community cases are still continuing to slowly decline. Overall, this news is promising because we can isolate those who are ill faster, prevent further spread, and continue to move forward.

- On another topic, I continue to receive many questions on whether or not face masks and face coverings protect people against COVID-19. I also continue to get asked if they are mandatory, and if people must wear them in grocery stores, on public transit, or outside when they are exercising. I'm therefore taking some time today to address these questions directly.

- First, we know that COVID-19 continues to spread in our city. This is why I continue to remind you to keep six feet, or two metres, away from others when not at home, to avoid touching your face, mouth, nose or eyes, and to wash your hands often. These are the best ways to protect yourself from this virus.

- According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, wearing a face covering or a cloth mask in the community has not been proven to protect the person wearing it and is not a substitute for physical distancing and hand washing. It is important to note that while the available scientific evidence on this subject is limited, there appears to be some benefit to wearing a mask in that it protects others from your germs.

- This is why at this time, I echo the recommendations shared earlier today by my provincial and federal health colleagues and I also strongly recommend wearing a mask in settings where you cannot physically distance from others.

- As I have shared many times, COVID-19 is a new virus, only identified in January. The reality is that we are still learning about this virus. We have learned that COVID-19 can spread before someone has symptoms, or is even aware that they have the infection. This is why especially now as we approach reopening in our city, I strongly recommend that we use face masks to protect others when we are in settings where we cannot maintain physical distancing. This will help to reduce virus spread in our community.

- Some examples of when to wear a face mask to protect others include when you are in an elevator, when you are grocery shopping, using transit, a taxi, or a ride share service. If you are out walking on the street with plenty of space, you do not need to wear a mask or a face covering. If you are running outside, you do not need to wear a mask or a face covering.

- However, when you are out and about, you may find yourself in a situation where you may need a mask, when you cannot maintain 6 feet of physical distance from others, so I ask that you please plan ahead as best you can. At this time, face masks or face coverings are not mandatory in Toronto.

- Another common question that I continue to receive is about what kinds of masks are most effective and what would I recommend? According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, face masks or face coverings should:
  --Allow for easy breathing;
  --Fit securely to the head with ties or ear loops;
  --Maintain their shape after washing and drying;
  --Include at least 2 layers of tightly woven cotton or linen; and
  --Cover your nose and mouth without gaping.

- And if you wear a mask, please be sure you are putting it on correctly. The first step is to wash your hands with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available. Keep your hair away from your face, and place the mask over your mouth and nose snugly to ensure there is no space. Your mask should fit comfortably and you should be able to breathe easily.

- It is important that you do not share your mask with others, and that you do not leave it around your neck, hanging from your ear or on your forehead. This could increase the chance of the mask becoming contaminated.

- Many local businesses are selling cloth face masks. For those of you who wish to make your own, please review the instructions on the Government of Canada's website. You can find the link on the City of Toronto website.

- A used mask should be placed directly in the laundry or a lined bin to be cleaned. Cloth masks should be washed after each use, in the laundry with other items and using the hot cycle. Non-reusable masks should be discarded in a lined garbage bin after use.

- It is extremely important that we keep the supply of medical masks for healthcare workers who need them for medical procedures and to care for individuals who have COVID-19. I ask you to consider making your own mask, or purchasing one from a local retailer or online.

- My final point about masks is that not everyone should wear a mask. This includes children under the age of two, anyone who has a medical condition that makes wearing a mask difficult, or who cannot remove the mask without assistance.

- On another topic, I continue to receive many questions about public health's role with COVID-19 testing. First, I want to clarify that the province leads all COVID-19 testing and testing guidelines in Ontario. Local public health departments can recommend for an individual to be tested, and we follow up with anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19, however, we do not conduct the tests. Community COVID-19 testing in Toronto is done almost exclusively by local hospitals and assessment centres. COVID-19 symptoms and a complete list of local assessment centres is available on our website.

- I have also received many questions about whether or not people should get retested after they have had the virus. Most people can be considered no longer contagious 14 days after their COVID-19 symptoms started, as long as their symptoms are getting better.

- At this time, the only people who need to be retested to confirm they are negative for this virus are people who were hospitalized with a severe COVID-19 infection and are waiting to return back to a long-term care home, or shelter. In addition, some healthcare workers are required by their occupational health and safety service to be retested in order for them to return to work.

- In closing, we need to continue to be very careful as we move forward, so we don't find ourselves in a position where we have to go back. So please continue to practise physical distancing, and please continue to take care of each other.

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Media contact: Lenore Bromley, Toronto Public Health, 416-338-7974, Lenore.Bromley@toronto.ca