

Update on COVID-19
Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health
August 31, 2020 at 2 p.m.
Members' Lounge, Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

- Thank you Mayor Tory and good afternoon everyone. First I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that today is International Overdose Awareness Day. It's with a heavy heart that I recognize that we continue to see so many loved ones in our community die from these preventable deaths.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on people who use drugs, their family members and friends, and the service providers who work so hard to support them each and every day. My team and I remain strongly committed to working with others to improve our collective response to this crisis.
- Turning our focus now to an update on our local COVID-19 experience, I'll share what we've learned, what lies ahead for us and how we can work together to make important choices over the next few months to stay safer as we live with this virus.
- Science is hard at work to defeat it. Reopening is happening. School is about to start and fall is coming.
- And in the weeks and months ahead we're all likely to be coming into much closer contact with one another. We have to balance all of these things to minimize the potential risk to ourselves and the people around us.
- Amongst the good news – and there is good news – is that we have done well in terms of managing virus spread and protecting our health care system from being overwhelmed as was the case in many other major cities. Nonetheless, we still have daily COVID-19 cases and community spread.
- Today, I'll tell you what we've learned here at home and from around the world and about the ways we're getting ready for the resurgence of COVID-19 in the weeks and months ahead and the things we need you to do as Torontonians. But first, let's look at the figures on COVID-19 today.

- Since the beginning of the pandemic we've seen a total of 16,044 cases, an increase of 40 new cases since yesterday.
- While the majority of people recover from COVID-19, in public health, our focus is on preventing COVID-19 infections in the first place.
- Our objectives throughout this pandemic have been to:
 - Minimize the loss of life and serious illness;
 - Reduce the spread of COVID-19 in our city;
 - Preserve the capacity of our local health care system;
 - And to mitigate the negative social, economic and broader health impacts of the pandemic.
- The only way to achieve these objectives is for all of us to keep washing our hands, watching our distance from others, wearing our masks, and avoiding crowds and close contact.
- We are at an important point. The first stage of this outbreak is behind us. You can see it here on this graph which shows the course of COVID-19 in Toronto, rising rapidly from the start of March, peaking in April, and then a general decline in the numbers from May onward.
- We've been more fortunate than many places, but our statistics still represent a tremendous amount of illness, loss, and suffering in our city.
- The choice we all face now is what we will do as we move towards the fall and winter phase of COVID-19 in Toronto.
- There is no question we will see resurgence. Amongst the best projections we have seen are those from the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, based at the University of Minnesota. They have described three possible scenarios:
 - Scenario 1: A series of repetitive small waves that occur consistently over the next year or so, then gradually diminish over time.
 - Scenario 2: A large wave in the fall or winter with smaller subsequent waves thereafter, similar to what was seen with the 1918-19 influenza pandemic.

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--Scenario 3: A “slow burn” of ongoing transmission and case occurrence, but without a clear wave pattern.

- There is no way to know what will happen. However, my team continues to listen to emerging scientific evidence and consider the latest facts to protect your health now, this fall and this winter.
- This summer we brought on additional staff to do case and contact tracing so that we have more people to help with this critical work that reduces virus spread.
- We've also delivered refresher training to the existing team. This is precise and delicate work and we've done everything we can to be well-prepared for the fall.
- The experience of other places tells us we need to plan for COVID-19 cases as school returns. My team is working with the province, our school boards, and schools to provide advice, training, education and support around infection prevention and control measures to prepare for a safer return to back to school. We're also hiring additional nurses to provide more on-the-ground support.
- Another important investment in infection prevention and control is the establishment of Toronto’s voluntary isolation centre. We are continuing discussions with the federal government to create a space for people infected with COVID-19 who can’t isolate safely at home. Establishing this voluntary isolation centre will be an important step for our city in our efforts to limit spread and keep you safer.
- We’ve also learned that certain neighbourhoods have been hit much harder by COVID-19. So to tackle spread in these areas we're deploying community outreach rapid response teams, multi-lingual teams to connect directly with people, agencies, and organizations working in these communities.
- We're also continuing to work with our provincial colleagues to support community pop-up testing sites in these areas of our city.

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- In long-term care, we're implementing a liaison response model as a way to enhance our support for long term care homes and partnerships between public health, local hospitals and the province.
- We are ensuring a data-driven response and we continue to conduct detailed data analysis to better understand risk factors associated with COVID-19, including sociodemographic characteristics and infection patterns.
- Taken altogether, we know that:
 - COVID-19 spreads readily from person to person.
 - It's easier to catch than the flu.
 - And COVID-19 is unpredictable. There are no guarantees about the kind of outcome you may have if you get it.
- We know that more serious outcomes like hospitalization and death are more likely in older adults with pre-existing conditions. And while younger people tend not to be as severely impacted, there are some who'll get really sick. And we still have some questions about kids and how easily — or not — they can spread disease to others.
- The bottom line is that we should avoid taking unnecessary chances and instead we should do everything we can to prevent getting COVID-19, or spreading COVID-19.
- You may ask, why is this important? This is important because the best available estimate shows that just over 1% of people in Ontario have antibodies to COVID-19. This means that the vast majority of us do not have immunity to COVID-19 and we are still vulnerable to infection.
- It gets more complicated because 20-40% of cases either don't show symptoms, or only show very mild symptoms.
- This means your mild illness may spread to someone else and become their serious illness. This is why it's crucial to act in ways that limit the chance that you could make someone else sick.

- It's important to be clear that with reopening there is an increased risk of exposure. But you can take steps to minimize your risk, just as we did at the beginning of this outbreak.
- This is why I urge you at every opportunity to wash your hands, keep your distance and wear your mask.
- But let's be honest. Living like this isn't easy. But there are many examples of what happens when we don't do our part:
 - For one, in Maine, a wedding earlier this month with 65 guests led to sixty infections – but only 22 of those infections were amongst guests. The infection spread to a jail 300 kilometres away and a health facility 150 kilometres away. One woman – who didn't even attend the wedding – died as a result.
- Resurgence of COVID-19 cases results from being in closer contact as we go about our lives. Based on what we've seen in other places, resurgence in Toronto is inevitable. Even New Zealand, hailed as one of the leaders in COVID-19 containment, has had to mobilize to fight cases that have popped up.
- We are planning based on certain assumptions. While scientists are working with speed and determination, we still don't expect highly effective treatments in the very near future and we aren't planning on vaccine availability before the spring of 2021 at the earliest. Until then, we have to find way to live with COVID-19 in our city.
- Our experience in the first months of this pandemic has helped us prepare for COVID-19 resurgence in Toronto. It isn't a question of if we'll see more virus in Toronto, it's a matter of when.
- This is a critical time for us but we still have time to make a difference in terms of what happens next.
- So all of us have to keep doing our part. We know that wearing a mask is one of the best ways to take care of each other and to protect people around you. And now, there are some studies which suggest that wearing a mask may protect you too. But please remember the greatest protection is what we do together:



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--How we learn from our experiences, the experiences of others and how we turn this into actions to protect your health;

--How we show our support for the health care workers who cared for the sick and all the essential workers who kept us fed and kept us moving and who provided the services that simply had to continue.

--And how we show respect for people suffering and experiencing loss from COVID-19.

- I'm saying it again because it can't be said enough: Everything that we do at Toronto Public Health to keep you safer depends on your actions in your daily lives.
- So in the many months ahead, please:
 - Build one bubble and protect it. For now, a bubble is made of ten people, not many bubbles involving those ten people.
 - Please get a flu shot. This year more than any.
 - Please avoid crowds, closed spaces and close contact with people outside your bubble.
 - And always: wash your hands often, watch your distance and wear your mask.
- You may be tired of hearing me say wash your hands, watch your distance and wear your mask – but please don't get tired of doing these things.
- These are the things we must resolve to do every minute of every day, until we can gather as we used to and think only about how much we're enjoying ourselves. And working together, I believe we will see that day. I will now turn it over to our City Manager, Chris Murray.

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