

**Update on COVID-19**  
**Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health**  
**February 22, 2021 at 2 p.m.**  
**Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.**

---

- Thank you, Mayor Tory, and good afternoon. Today I am reporting 366 new cases of COVID-19. 10 people have been admitted to hospital, bringing the total to 337, and 64 people are in the ICU. Sadly, I am reporting 2 new deaths.
- There are 71 confirmed variant of concern cases in Toronto:
  - 70 are the U.K. variant B.1.1.7.
  - 1 is the Brazilian variant.
- 511 cases have screened positive for mutations and are expected to be confirmed as variants of concern.
- There is encouraging news to report – on vaccines and also from long-term care homes in Toronto.
- Public Health Scotland has issued a study showing that, by the fourth week after receiving an initial dose, the Pfizer vaccine reduced the risk of hospitalization from COVID-19 by up to 85% and the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine reduced the risk of hospitalization by up to 94%.
- As well, the protection was above 80% for people 80 years of age and older.
- And as you've just heard from the Mayor, our data shows that the percent positivity in COVID-19 tests from long-term care homes has dropped significantly and we are seeing fewer cases in these settings.
- This is extremely good news. It demonstrates the effectiveness of the vaccines and the efforts by so many people and organizations to drive down spread and protect the people living in long-term care and retirement homes.
- Last week, I said that while indicators seemed to be heading in the right direction, there were also warning lights flashing.

- I want to illustrate those warning lights today – because by delaying a move toward reduced restrictions we are taking steps that will allow us to make future decisions with confidence, and steps to protect the ground we have gained, because the virus still has the upper hand.
- The percent positivity rate in COVID-19 tests in Toronto is 4.8%.
- That is too high to feel good about.
- If our approach is slow and sure, it will change for the better.
- But we have seen before – here and elsewhere – that given the chance, the virus will take ruthless advantage of the upper hand and spread again, likely rebounding worse than before.
- The variants of concern strengthen its ability to do its worst – and in Toronto we are seeing a steady increase in variants, particularly the UK variant, B.1.1.7.
- On February 15<sup>th</sup>, I reported 39 cases where a variant of concern was confirmed.
- Today, the total is 71.
- In a week.
- The more telling number is the cases that have screened positive. Confirmation of a variant is a slow laboratory process that takes between 7 and 14 days for each confirmation.
- Typically, a case that screens positive is eventually confirmed as a variant. So the screened positive cases is the number to watch and that is why the extension of the stay at home order is so important to determining the safest path forward for Toronto.



## Public Health

- I first reported the screened positive figure on February 18<sup>th</sup> – at 341 cases. The total rose the next day to 384. And the next day to 438. It was 456 yesterday. And it is 511 today.
- Each day it has increased and I remind you about the nature of exponential growth – which is what we’re dealing with.
- Exponential growth is a steady, stealthy lower level of growth until a point where infection rates explode and the only real option is to ride out that wave of disease and hope for the best.
- In the United States the death toll from COVID-19 will pass half a million people today – if it hasn’t already.
- In Toronto, we have now passed 2,600 deaths.
- Since February 15<sup>th</sup>, we have reported 2,951 cases of COVID-19 in Toronto and seen almost 130 people admitted to hospital.
- We are not out of the woods yet.
- Many of you will have heard of Dr. Michael Osterholm, one of North America’s foremost epidemiologists and a member of President Biden’s Transition COVID-19 Advisory Board.
- Dr. Osterholm publishes regularly on COVID-19 and I respect his expertise.
- He likes to compare the threat of the variants to the idea of an incoming hurricane – and in real hurricanes we’ve seen this tragedy time and time again – people know it's coming but they act too late, or they don’t act at all.
- We all know what happens as a result.

## Public Health

- Three days ago he offered this with regard to the UK variant in the United States, saying “we’re beginning to see the number of B.1.1.7. variants double every ten days. This is exactly what happened in Europe before we saw the major surges.”
- In Toronto, we have these amazing vaccines coming – slowly – and I know there is a lot of understandable feeling about that. Nonetheless, they are coming and certainly Toronto has put a massive amount of effort into being able to get you your shot as the supply grows.
- Medically, there is concern that variants could reduce the efficacy of the vaccines to some extent. The data aren't clear, but the risk is.
- At the beginning of my remarks I told you about percent positivity rates that are now under 1% in COVID-19 tests from our long-term care homes.
- That’s the power of vaccines.
- That’s what I want for all of us.
- But in the meantime we want to minimize the risk of diminishing their power to protect us.
- Yesterday was a beautiful day in Toronto.
- It was the kind of winter day that makes you yearn for spring as well as the end of this pandemic.
- We have to remember, despite our exhaustion and frustration and yearning, that we can be our best defense or our worst enemy when it comes to the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The next 2 weeks are a critical opportunity to better understand where we are going, when, and how.



## Public Health

- The central question is how will the variants dominate in Toronto and what will that do to us and to our healthcare system.
- By understanding the extent of variants we can plan for how best to go forward as the vaccine programs are implemented.

-30-

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