

Update on COVID-19
Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health
March 8, 2021 at 2 p.m.
Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

- Thank you, Chief Pegg. Good afternoon, and happy International Women's Day to all. Today I am reporting 636 new cases of COVID-19. 257 people are in hospital, and 53 people are in the ICU. I'm sorry to have to report 4 new deaths.
- I'll discuss the status of the variants at the end of my remarks, but I want to show you a graph that illustrates the impact of vaccines.
- This graph is about cases in long-term care and retirement homes in Toronto.
- You see the trend follows the general rise in cases that we saw in December and the new year throughout Toronto.
- By the week of January 3rd, there were over 300 cases in long-term care and retirement home residents.
- But at the tailing end of the graph we see, with vaccination completed, that the case counts are very small.
- The week of February 21st saw two cases in residents within Toronto's 80 retirement homes and 87 long-term care homes.
- That is exactly the kind of outcome we hope for following a vaccination campaign.
- I also want to speak to an anecdotal story from a long-term care home with about a hundred residents, where by mid-February, 91% of those residents had received two dose immunization, as had about 70% of staff.
- Nonetheless, 7 cases were identified in unimmunized staff in late February, and 6 of 7 are variants of concern.

- To-date there are no new reported cases or illnesses amongst immunized staff and residents and there have been no new cases linked to this home in the past week.
- There are 4 viable vaccines approved in Canada.
- I know there is discussion that some vaccines are seen as better, or stronger than others.
- This is usually based on descriptions of each vaccine's overall efficacy.
- There are two points I wish to make in that respect:
 - First, as Medical Officer of Health, I can promise you I am immersed in information about the vaccines. Let me say as plainly as possible that when it's my turn for a vaccine, I would happily receive any of the four with complete confidence.
 - Second, the data shows that all four work equally well at preventing serious illness requiring hospitalization and at preventing serious illness resulting in death.
- That's what we must really prevent.
- That's the level of protection that truly matters.
- So I encourage you to get your vaccination when your turn comes with confidence in the vaccine you're receiving.
- If you are vaccinated you can have confidence you are protected against the worst.
- Finally, I want to say something really important to remember in terms of taking care of your own health right now.
- These are exciting and promising times, with vaccine supply on the increase.
- But please, don't mistake progress for completion.

- We have a ways to go yet and I want to remind you – and we've seen this before – if we give COVID-19 an inch, it will take a mile.
- It will take any opportunity to establish itself and spread.
- So I have to ask you for more patience while we get millions of people in Toronto vaccinated.
- We will get there, but in the meantime I see protective measures like masks and distancing measures being abandoned in many places, particularly in the United States – and while I understand the weariness I also know the reality.
- COVID-19 has not gone away – it and its variants are still out there, just looking for a person to infect.
- 2,004 cases have screened positive for mutations and are expected to be confirmed as variants of concern in Toronto.
- A week ago that number was 1,179.
- So we have come perilously close to almost doubling this count within a week.
- And our calculated doubling time is now at 9 days.
- While our last full week of data showed that 32% of COVID-19 cases involved a variant, preliminary data from the most recent period suggests almost 40% of our reported cases are now being screened positive as a variant of concern.
- The Scripps Research Institute and The Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota found in all countries where variants caused threatening resurgences, in each instance it was when variants comprised 50% of all viruses identified.
- Beyond the threat of spread due to increased transmissibility, I also worry about the potential effect of variants on the vaccines.
- The risk is analogous to antibiotic resistance – which we all understand.

- Overuse of antibiotics has reduced the ability of many of those vital drugs to fight infection.
- In the same sense, we have seen the adaptability of the coronavirus as it spreads from one person to another.
- But a virus that isn't being transmitted is a virus that doesn't get the opportunity to mutate.
- The vaccines are powerful but they are not beyond challenge.
- I have confidence the vaccine platforms can be adapted to counter variants but we must absolutely play our part.
- We cannot take the promise of vaccines for granted.
- We have to be able to rely on the power of the vaccines to protect us.
- Forcing COVID-19 into decline is achievable – we're seeing it already in our long-term care and retirement home residents.
- In this transition phase toward a vaccinated majority it requires us to continue taking steps to protect ourselves, those who matter to us most and, by extension, everyone around us.

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