

Update on COVID-19
Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health
March 17, 2021 at 2 p.m.
Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

- Thank you Mayor Tory, and good afternoon.
- Today, I am reporting 576 new cases of COVID-19.
- 290 people are in the hospital. 50 people are in the ICU.
- I am, sadly, also reporting the deaths of five people today.
- The current number of cases screened positive for variants of concern is 3,920.
- As you've just heard, we have been in conversation with the Province and specifically the Chief Medical Officer of Health about where next to take Toronto within the COVID-19 framework.
- At this time, it is my view the data do not support the kind of reopening that would be provided for under the red zone designation.
- We anticipate that the Province will announce its decision formally on Friday.
- In our conversations, we indicated an openness to a modest expansion of the options available to people in Toronto, particularly outdoor-focused activity.
- I have always said that in my duties as Medical Officer of Health I would be guided – like all public health practitioners – by the responsibility to champion public health and by data that paints a clear picture about the right course of action.
- Facts and data have always formed the basis for my advice and perspective.
- Facts and data have led us along very difficult but necessary courses of action, as facts and data have led to support for change or reversing course.

- We are moving into a new season and warmer weather and we have evidence that outdoor activity is lower risk than indoor activity.
- Everyone sees the exhaustion within the city as it relates to all the limitations COVID-19 has forced upon us.
- This is understandable – and inevitable.
- That is why modest steps forward in the realm of outdoor activity are a good proving ground at this time.
- If in the window of the next few weeks the data indicates course corrections are necessary, course corrections can be made.
- I certainly take the view in the variant environment that course correction must be swift and decisive should the outbreak's pace of expansion sound alarm bells.
- I will not hesitate to call for actions in this instance.
- In public health, all or nothing is seldom a workable solution.
- Certainly at the height of the pandemic – at its most dangerous – there was widespread support for very strong restrictions, to bring under control the threat to ourselves and to our health care system.
- Today, our long term care and retirement home populations are better protected than at any other point in the pandemic.
- Steady progress is being made to vaccinate people 80 and older and healthcare workers, and vaccine supplies will continue to increase.
- And we know that as spring arrives people will be able to spend more time outdoors.

- What I have described for you today represents change that can be tried given our current circumstances.
- But these are incremental changes.
- And they are cautious and can be reversed if circumstances demand.
- So I would like to restate a few key points. We all need to fully understand what might happen at any point as we move ahead in the next stretch of time.
- First, the pandemic continues.
- Variant infections have risen steadily, if slowly.
- Even small steps forward permitting additional outdoor activities do not signal that the threat has been reduced to an extent that we can let our guard down when it comes to self-protection.
- In fact, each step forward is a reminder we've got to up our game.
- We are increasingly moving around – and we have to do it masked and at a distance and with every other practical consideration we can make to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and lower the risk of becoming infected with it.
- The more we can reduce the spread of COVID-19 through distance and masking, the more effective our vaccination efforts will be.
- Finally today, a quick plea again to support getting 80 year olds vaccinated.
- Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, neighbours – whomever you know who is 80 and over, please reach out to them.
- Ask them about their plans to be vaccinated and offer to help them – whether it's to book an appointment, whether it's to get to a clinic, or whether it's to arrange a call to their own doctor to talk about getting vaccinated.

- We know that people trust their own doctors.
- And we know that a problem shared is a problem halved – and many times a problem solved.
- Please think about the 80 year olds in your life who’ve come through this last, frightening year and help them make their years ahead safer.
- As ever – for all of us – what happens in the future relies in large part on what we do, how diligent we are about mask wearing and distance, and how respectful we are of COVID-19’s continuing capacity to resurge if we’re not careful in our actions and our choices.

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