

Update on COVID-19
Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health
November 30, 2021 at 9:30 a.m.
Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

- Thank you Mayor Tory, and good morning.
- Last Friday, the World Health Organization designated the new COVID-19 variant "Omicron", recently detected and identified in South Africa, a "variant of concern".
- Like governments, scientists and public health specialists around the world – in Toronto, we are grateful to the South African government and its scientists who have openly communicated about this new variant.
- This speaks to the level of collaboration and global information sharing about the virus. This degree of world-wide cooperation is reassuring and demonstrates that the system to monitor virus activity is working.
- As South African scientists and other experts in the field have communicated, more study is necessary to fully understand what the implications of this new variant might be.
- I appreciate that the idea of a new COVID-19 variant – or the words “viral mutation” – may sound concerning. However, it is important that in general, we must remember viruses mutate as a matter of course.
- And it's true that Omicron contains mutations that are associated with increased transmissibility in previously identified COVID-19 variants, and that there are also mutations on Omicron that are associated with some degree of immune escape.
- However, to more fully comprehend the Omicron variant, clinical observation of real life experience around the world is needed over the next few weeks.

- As this proceeds and we monitor carefully, it is important to remember just how far we have come since January 2020 in terms of understanding COVID-19.
- We know now how it is transmitted, we know how to treat it and we have effective vaccines.
- While we await the results of scientific study of Omicron and as we move towards the winter holiday season, there are two messages I wish to convey.
- First – vaccine makes a difference. And so far, vaccines have proven effective, including right here in Toronto.
- In fact, analysis done by our epidemiology team at Toronto Public Health shows that this year from August 1 to November 6, across all neighbourhoods in Toronto, for every 10 per cent increase in vaccination coverage, there was a 7 per cent decrease in the incidence of cases of COVID-19.
- In addition, local data shows that the total number of Toronto residents who are vaccinated, only 0.17 per cent became infected with COVID-19 after they were fully vaccinated with two doses. That's 3,936 cases amongst the 2,288,445 people after they were vaccinated with 2 doses here in Toronto. In other words, breakthrough infections are rare.
- What this all adds up to is this: Vaccination continues to be one of the most important actions we can take and that we can encourage others to take as well.
- The second message I want to provide you today is that all the measures that have protected us to date, continue to be important in light of omicron and as we seek to connect over the holiday season.

- Specifically, we need to remember that we have several tools at our disposal to help protect our households, family and friends, our schools and our communities from COVID-19.
- Mask while indoors. Keep your in-person social circle small and limit it to vaccinated individuals as much as possible. Wash your hands. Practice physical distancing. Stay home when you're sick.
- Encourage your workplace or community group to develop a vaccination policy.
- If you operate a workplaces or responsible for a community group or setting – please continue to keep records of in-person attendees or visitors. This will help to facilitate public health follow-up should a COVID-19 case be detected.
- We will see more cases of the Omicron variant detected in the future. It is not a question of "if" but a question of "when".
- And it bears repeating – viruses mutate as part of their regular course. But we also know this: the more we are able to reduce transmission, the less likely is it that new variants will emerge.
- Vaccines remain safe, effective and necessary to help bring the COVID-19 pandemic to an end. The best action you can take today – if you are born in 2016 or earlier – is to get fully vaccinated. And for those of you who are eligible for a third dose, I encourage you to get yours as soon as possible.
- Vaccination – coupled with public health measures that we know reduce transmission regardless of what variant we face – remain the best tools at our disposal.