

Update on COVID-19
Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health
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Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

- Thank you Mayor Tory, and good morning.
- Today I want to provide a situational update in relation to COVID-19 and the Omicron variant.
- With schools poised to return to in-person learning – and with new questions about what's next – I want to describe what we know and what we may anticipate in the coming days and weeks ahead.
- Currently, we continue to see a high level of COVID-19 spread in Toronto. I regret to report that since last week, hospitalizations, ICU admissions, and deaths due to COVID-19 have continued to increase.
- To those who are ill, I send best wishes for a speedy recovery. And for those who have lost loved ones, I send my sincere condolences.
- In recent days, we've heard questions about whether the Omicron wave has reached its peak. While it is still too early to know for sure, we are seeing initial indicators that the rate of infection may have plateaued or started to decline. But we still have a long ways to go.
- The level of viral activity in our community continues to be extremely concerning, and continues to put a significant strain on our health care system.
- First, this level of admissions to hospital strains the resources within hospitals.
- Second, with such widespread transmission in the community, health care staff themselves are falling ill because of the virus.

- This being said, while we continue to see widespread transmission of COVID-19, the most recent data show that there are reasons for cautious optimism.
- A recent summary of our hospitalized cases confirmed that we are seeing shorter lengths of hospital stay than in previous waves.
- Toronto's high vaccination rate is also having a significant impact in this wave of COVID-19 infection compared to previous waves – and three doses of vaccine continues to provide the best protection against the Omicron variant.
- Recent Ontario data paint a clear picture of the protection that the COVID-19 vaccines provide.
- For cases reported between December 24 and January 6, in the province, the rate of hospitalization for COVID-19 was four times higher for unvaccinated individuals than for those with three doses.
- The difference was even starker for the recorded rate of ICU admission, which was eight times higher for unvaccinated individuals than for those with three doses of vaccine.
- So what does this mean for us in Toronto?
- Well, schools returning to in-person learning is a positive sign, as this is an essential activity that impacts the health and wellbeing of our children and youth.
- While re-opening to schools to in-person learning – and any changes to the current public health restrictions currently in place – are within the power of the Province – I would say this.
- We all have tools to preserve and protect the progress we are making, and to help reduce the spread of the Omicron variant as much as possible. Using these tools will help to keep our school environments as safe as possible.

- The evidence shows that multiple layers of protection are necessary to mitigate transmission of COVID-19 and to keep schools as safe as possible. This includes vaccination, ventilation, filtration, daily COVID-19 screening for students and staff, using a well-fitting mask and physical distancing, amongst other measures.
- The science also suggests that increasing opportunities for people to interact with each other should be done with caution, especially as schools are just reopening.
- Ensuring the success of in-person learning for the rest of the school year relies on seeing solid evidence of an improving COVID-19 situation overall *before* introducing changes that are likely to lead to more in-person interaction.
- We have learned from our own experiences and from the experiences of other jurisdictions, that going too quickly risks the progress that we have made – and in some cases has forced us to go back to more restrictions.
- We have seen and felt just how disruptive just how this is. Moving gradually allows time to assess the impact of changes that increase overall community activity and allows us to make informed decisions on next steps, to stay in better control and protect the gains that we have made.
- I can compare this to the role of a physician when changing a patient's medications.
- If there is a change in a person's health and they are currently taking medications, doctors will slowly and methodically make adjustments and then evaluate the outcome.
- This is especially true with patients who are taking several different medications.
- There is a fine balance to maintain, with one change being made at a time, followed by a period of evaluation.

- A similar approach can be adopted as we think about our road ahead in the context of Omicron and with public health measures.
- We are all looking forward to resuming activities that we have missed – and we need to do so slowly and with caution to protect the gains we have made.
- A period of evaluation helps to ensure that the current combination of measures within our current context is effective.
- And as individuals, we each have a role to play as well.
- We must continue to do our very best to protect and care for ourselves and others by taking the steps that we know work: getting vaccinated, reducing in-person contact, wearing a well-fitting high quality mask, practising physical distancing, and staying home when we're sick.
- As the Mayor just said, I know we all want to see the end of this pandemic. And while that day will come, we have to continue to do everything within our power to stay the course.