IMPORTANT MESSAGE FROM YORK REGION PUBLIC HEALTH

November 16, 2022

Dear families,

On Monday, November 14, 2022, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health **strongly recommended Ontario residents mask in all indoor public settings**, with a strong emphasis on schools and child care settings. This fall there has been an unprecedented increase in respiratory illnesses, and hospitals in Ontario are overwhelmed with very ill children coming to emergency departments and needing hospitalization. This crisis includes York Region hospitals, which are experiencing well over double the normal number of admitted paediatric patients, many of whom need support to breathe.

This wave of illness in children is mostly due to Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and influenza, not COVID-19. However, these viruses are spread in a similar way to COVID-19, and we know that masking can be very effective in preventing spread from person to person and more generally in the community.

While this increase in severe illnesses is mostly in very young children, we all play a critical role in decreasing spread in the community. There are steps we can take to help reduce spread of these viruses, protect each other and decrease the burden on hospitals so they can be available to all of us when we need them.

For the last few months, York Region has encouraged masks as a personal choice and for those who are most at risk. Now, unfortunately, those who are most at risk are very small children who may not be able to wear masks easily or consistently. Please do your best to encourage mask wearing in yourself and your children. The past few years have been a challenging time for many, and York Region Public Health encourages you to consider kindness in your masking decisions.

We would like to remind everyone to get back to the basics that we know work exceptionally well in preventing the spread of COVID-19, RSV and influenza, as well as other cold viruses:

- Mask in indoor public settings, including schools and child care settings due to the additional risk of RSV and influenza
- Check for respiratory symptoms in yourself and your children daily
- Keep your children home if they are sick
- Ensure you are vaccinated for both COVID-19 and the flu this season
- Always practice good hand hygiene and regularly clean surfaces – which is especially important for RSV and flu viruses

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WEAR A MASK

We strongly recommend students/attendees, staff and visitors wear a mask in schools, child care settings and while on school and child care transportation. This recommendation includes children two to five years of age if they can tolerate a mask.

Parents and household members who are sick should also consider masking even while at home to prevent the spread of viruses to their small children who are at higher risk right now.

CHECK FOR SYMPTOMS DAILY AND STAY HOME WHEN SICK

Checking for symptoms of respiratory illnesses daily helps keep our communities safe. Please complete the provincial screening tool before attending each day. Parents can complete the screening tool on behalf of their child, but please ask your child about symptoms directly.

If your child becomes sick, including with symptoms like vomiting, diarrhea and stomach pain, they should stay home – even if they test negative for COVID-19. Follow the directions provided by the screening tool.

Your child can return to school or child care if their symptoms have been improving for at least 24 hours (48 hours if they had nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea), and they do not have a fever and do not develop any additional symptoms. If your child had COVID-19 they should wear a mask for 10 days from the start of their symptoms or positive test result (whichever is earlier).

GET VACCINATED

York Region residents of all ages can protect themselves and meaningfully contribute to decreasing the pressure on our hospitals and health care services in York Region and across Ontario by getting vaccinated for both influenza and COVID-19. This year's flu shot appears to be a good match to the dominant strain of influenza causing infections this year.

York Region Public Health's vaccine clinics now offer flu and COVID-19 vaccines, including bivalent boosters for those 12 years of age and older. Anyone five years of age and older can receive their COVID-19 and flu vaccine at the same time. Children six months to four years of age must wait 14 days between vaccines.

Visit the following links or call Access York at 1-877-464-9675 for more information:

- york.ca/COVID19Vaccine
- york.ca/flu
- york.ca/SafeAtSchool
- york.ca/covid19vaccineinfo

Thank you,

York Region Public Health

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- School and Child Care Screening Tool – Government of Ontario
- How to put on a facemask | Masks protect you and me
- Video: Handwashing for kids | Hooray for Handwashing
- Information for Parents to Help Prevent the Spread of Illness

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