

Canada increases border restrictions as Omicron variant poses new COVID-19 threat

By Rob Paul

Last week, the World Health Organization classified the COVID-19 Omicron variant as a variant of concern. Since then, it has been found in multiple countries, including several travel-related cases in Canada.

The variant became a concern last week when it was detected in South Africa and is viewed as potentially more highly contagious than the Delta variant. As a result, the Federal Government announced additional border measures to reduce the risk of it entering Canada.

Canada has put into effect a mandate that any foreign nationals who have been in any of the countries on the entry prohibition list within the previous 14 days will not be permitted entry into Canada. The countries on the list are Botswana, Egypt, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

"We are taking quick action at our borders to mitigate travel related importations of the Omicron variant," said Jean-Yves Duclos, Canada's Minister of Health. "While our monitoring systems are working well, we now know that the Omicron variant is present in Canada. We need to remain vigilant in our own actions. Vaccination and simple public health measures such as masking and limiting the number of persons we interact with slow down transmission, reduce hospitalization and death, and protect our health systems from being overwhelmed. We must all continue to do our part to protect all people in Canada."

At an announcement in Mississauga on December 1 for funding towards Trillium Health Partners, Premier Doug Ford and Deputy Premier and Minister of Health Christine Elliott spoke about the Omicron variant.

"Cause for concern, but not a cause for panic," said Ford. "Every day we learn more about the Omicron virus and how quickly it can spread and how severe it may be. We're learning about how effective our vaccines are and every day we hold off more cases from entering our country, the more time we have to learn and prepare. The best thing we can do right now is fortify our borders. Our best defence is keeping the variant out of our country. I want to thank the Feds for taking action and being decisive on the borders."

"We will continue to call on them to be proactive and not wait to implement every measure needed to keep Canadians safe. The good news is that each of us has the power to slow the spread of this variant and all variants. If you haven't already done so, please get vaccinated today. If you've put off getting your second dose then please get your second dose, and if you're eligible for your third dose then please book your booster appointment."

There will also be increased screening at airports to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 due to the contagious variant, but the severity of impact the variant could have in Ontario and Canada is still not known.

"There's still a lot we don't know about the Omicron variant, the extent of the transmissibility, the virulence, and how safe and effective our vaccines are, but we're continuing with all of our precautions," said Elliott. "We have a great system for testing and case and contact management that has followed up with all 375 people who had travelled to the South African countries. We'll continue to test and follow up while ensuring their quarantine. We're also continuing with our vaccinations and doing really well, we're at 89.9 per cent with 12 years and up for first dose and 87 per cent with people with the second dose and have already vaccinated over 109,000 children (five to 11) in the last 10 days."

Peel itself has 75 per cent of all residents fully vaccinated with 78.4 per cent at one dose. 89.7 per cent of all adults (18+) in the Region have at least one dose and 86.2 per cent have both doses while those 12 and older are at 89.7 per cent single dose coverage and 86 per cent double dose coverage.

In total, the Region has administered 2,579,638 doses of the vaccine to 1,331,226 individuals. 1,214,490 individuals have both doses and 33,922 have received a third dose.

COVID cases in the Region remain steady with 309 new cases this week to bring its total to 119,318, but there were no additional deaths as the number stayed at 1,031.

In Caledon, there were 14 new cases to bring the total to 4,979 as the death count remains at 22 for the Town.

To book a vaccine in the Region of Peel, visit www.peelregion.ca/coronavirus/vaccine/book-appointment/.

To download or print a copy of your proof of vaccination, visit covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-19-vaccine-booking-support#proof-of-vaccination. To learn more about the official QR code system Ontario has implemented and to access yours, visit covid-19.ontario.ca/get-proof.