

Dr. Loh encourages getting Moderna to increase two-dose coverage in response to Pfizer shortage

By Rob Paul

Dr. Lawrence Loh, Peel's Medical Officer of Health met with Town Council for an update on COVID-19 in Peel, and more specifically Caledon.

As the total case number in Peel continues to improve with a cumulative case count of 111,141—a 283 case increase since last week—there continues to be severe cases related to the Delta variant with 28 more deaths in the last week to bring the total to 806 in the Region.

For Caledon, there's been 4,434 total cases with 12 in the last week and two more COVID related deaths as the total increases to 20.

Vaccination goals continue to be reached though with 1,459,801 total doses administered in Peel—150,639 between June 13 and June 21. In total, 65 per cent of the population in the Region of Peel have initiated their vaccination with at least one dose—18.4 per cent of all residents have both doses.

“In the previous week, we have seen our incidence rate in the Region of Peel decline by another 40 per cent, week on week,” said Loh. “At this point in time in Peel, the test positivity is at three per cent with an incidence rate of 21 per 100,000 population—in Caledon those numbers are three per cent test positivity and 11.8 per 100,000 population. It's important to note that these are the most favourable numbers we've seen in our community, almost since the reopening started back in August 2020.”

Loh says he is confident things are trending in the right direction in both the Region and the Province, but as Ontario continues its reopen, he says it's just as important as ever to continue following the health and safety guidelines to make sure there's no decline.

“However, the situation is a little bit different from there, as you know the wild type coronavirus has since been replaced by the Delta variant—which was first identified in the Indian subcontinent—and this variant is more transmissible and more severe. It does suggest that with an increase in any contact or interactions rapid transmission and growth is forecasted by the Ontario Science Table and really requires us to continue with the measures that are in place with distancing and masking, and also to ensure we're doing our very best to get to two-dose vaccine coverage in our community.”

Peel is beginning to reach thresholds towards a safe reopening with the adult population starting to near full first dose coverage thanks to the increase in clinic options.

“In respect to vaccinations, I'm pleased to report that we've hit our first milestone in our vaccination program with 76 per cent of the 18-plus population in the Region of Peel covered with at least one dose of vaccine,” Loh said. “As of [June 23] we will be approaching approximately 25 per cent of the 18-plus population with two doses of vaccine. Reassuringly—especially for a potential return to school in the fall—approximately 60 per cent of our population between 12 and 17 have received one dose of the vaccine at this point in time.

“It's important to highlight that getting to widespread two-dose coverage in our Region offers the best protection from COVID-19, in particular the Delta variant that threatens to grow in the event that we open too quickly,” said Loh. “At this point in time, we have developed a system capacity that is delivering approximately 25,000 doses per day across mass vaccination mobile, workplace, community, and hospital sites.”

Previously, Loh has stated that with 70 to 75 per cent two-dose coverage in Peel, they will be able to safely begin a full reopen and at the current vaccination rate that could be achieved by September.

"We are approximately vaccinating 10 per cent of our eligible population every week," said Loh. "If you do the math and we're at 25 per cent right now, it's just a matter of a month and some weeks before we actually get to broad two-dose coverage in our community, which I think will certainly cement any potential reopening with confidence."

As the Pfizer vaccine continues to have supply issues, all clinics in Peel have moved to offer Moderna for all appointments for adults; those between 12 and 17 will be vaccinated with the remains doses of Pfizer. To continue with vaccination progress, Loh wants to instil confidence in the community that mixing vaccines is safe and effective.

"At this time, we're also dealing with continued supply chain challenges," said Loh. "While overall vaccine supply has improved, we know that Pfizer is experiencing some delays both this week as well as in the first half of July. Moderna is going to be much more readily available, as they make up for their supply chain challenges that occurred in April and May. It's very vital for me to state at this juncture that the National Advisory Committee of Immunization has deemed that both Pfizer and Moderna are essentially bioequivalent in terms of their mechanism, they have a similar side effect profile and similar effectiveness profile; they are both safe and effective. There is encouragement that if we want to rapidly get to two-dose coverage, it's less about what's the label on the vaccine and more about making sure that you have two valid doses to ensure that we are able to continue to reopen with confidence and ensure that exiting the acute phase of the pandemic is assured."

The recommendation provides Peel with more flexibility to continue to vaccinate during the Pfizer shipment delay. The COVID-19 mRNA vaccines (Moderna and Pfizer) are interchangeable and mixing doses will allow for more two doses coverage in the Region.

"This Pfizer shipment delay provides us an opportunity to remind our community of the clear science around interchangeability," said Loh. "Our community Mass Vaccination Program has again built out to full capacity to quickly achieve broad two-dose coverage in Peel. Subject to provincial allocation, we will continue to use all available supplies of approved vaccine to keep our reopening on track. I urge all residents to access two-dose protection in any approved combination as quickly as possible to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their community. I also remind our residents to be patient, kind, and respectful to all our vaccination clinic staff; they are working tirelessly to protect you with the tools and supply that they have been given."

His last note was that the reopen might seem slow and with the summer here residents might feel more confident returning to normal, but he wants to make clear the short-term sacrifice for long-term success is the best option.

"While the Province's current reopening approach does seem slow and gradual, it's taking into account a desire to ensure that this reopening is the last reopening," Loh said. "By ensuring we take this gradual reopening process, it ensures that we keep our contact and interaction numbers to a minimum; particularly indoors; it will allow us to increase our two-dose coverage across our community in the weeks to come."

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