

Loh speaks with Council about biggest questions during COVID-19 Omicron surge

By Rob Paul

At a general committee meeting on Tuesday, Dr. Lawrence Loh, Peel Medical Officer of Health, spoke with Town Council about COVID-19 and the current situation with the Omicron variant.

Loh provided information to questions Council have heard from residents of Caledon regarding the severity of the variant, vaccinations, and third dose booster availability.

Prior to Loh taking questions, Mayor Allan Thompson took the time to thank Loh and his team for their unwavering commitment to keeping the community safe.

"Thank you for your leadership in keeping Peel healthy to the best of your ability, as well as Caledon in particular," said Thompson. "We're really grateful for your leadership in holding a firm hand on the wheel."

Councillor Lynn Kieran asked Loh to clear up to residents the importance of getting vaccinated, even if they're already had COVID, due to the temporary immunity from infection not being a long-term solution.

"A lot of the people in hospitals or in ICU at this time are individuals who are largely unvaccinated as well as individuals who are older or have not seen a strong enough immune response based on two or three doses," said Loh. "I would encourage people to get vaccinated even if they've had the infection. It's very clear that while you do obtain a natural immunity following an infection, it is very brief and fleeting. The recommendation is that with people who have had an infection, even with Omicron or Delta, are eligible to get a booster as soon as they're well again. Dr. Moore has said that 30 days (after infection) is a reasonable timeline to get the most robust immunity."

"When it comes to the immune question overall, one of the reasons this virus has had so many severe outcomes previously was because it was a 'novel coronavirus' and individuals who are unvaccinated and uninfected, this virus is still as new to their immune system today as it was in January 2020, which is why some of them are still at greater risk of experiencing these severe outcomes. The hope is if someone survives an infection, even if their active immunity wanes, they'll still have that memory immunity from having had the infection previously which will limit any future severity if they do come in contact again. But that's not to say that people should rely on natural infection, the most certain way to make sure you actually have that memory immunity in place is to ensure that you get vaccinated with two doses at least and three if you're older."

With the importance of receiving third dose boosters, Thompson inquired about the availability of boosters for residents because many are on wait lists into February.

"There's capacity throughout the system and it's a good opportunity for me to remind people to constantly check online," said Loh. "We're releasing new appointments every day and we're opening a new mass clinic (open as of January 19 at Rockwood Mall) in south Mississauga because Mississauga didn't have a mass clinic for quite some time. I know there's availability there if people are willing to make the drive. Our team is also looking at school clinics and pop-up clinics, many of which are servicing the Caledon area. We've put out all sorts of appointments and we are starting to notice a decrease in demand, and I think there are a number of factors associated with this."

"First of all, mRNA is mRNA so if you're getting Moderna or Pfizer, either is great as a booster. There is a supply constraint right now in the Province on adult Pfizer and we're really encouraging people to get Moderna. I myself got two doses of Moderna and would do it again in a heartbeat. I really want to encourage people to take the booster available to them, especially in the midst of a surge. I also want to remind people that if they have been infected, still get the booster."

With the current restrictions around rapid tests and people wanting to return to work in a safe manner, Thompson also asked Loh about the potential of their availability for the community. He noted that rapid tests will likely become available once Omicron is less of a threat.

"This is a good opportunity for me to highlight to folks that the isolation guidance has changed; you do not need to have a negative test in order to return to work," Loh said. "If you've completed your five days of isolation and your symptoms are better or improving, then you can resume your normal activities at that time. That's for you and for anyone in your household?again, it's specific to the household.

"I'd also echo that advice for employers as well. We've heard certain employers requiring negative tests to return to work, that's not necessary anymore. We're moving away from containment to mitigation. I encourage employers to revisit their policies. The rapid tests will probably arrive after Omicron surge has dissipated and it's for this reason that I think rapid tests provide an opportunity for peace of mind. The advice that we've been giving is because Omicron is so widespread in the community, if you've got (any of the symptoms) assume you have Omicron, self-isolate, get better, and no test is needed because honestly it's really widespread in our community at this time."

Given that Councillor Tony Rosa works in a school, he said he's heard from many parents and teachers about concerns surrounding the decision to no longer report COVID-19 cases in the schools and specifically in classrooms as students return to class.

"The Province has made it very clear we've shifted away from containment to mitigation, so the focus is not on preventing infection alone, but it's about preventing severity," said Loh. "What has changed in the school setting is that we have highly vaccinated staff population, highly vaccinated secondary school population, and growing vaccine coverage in our elementary school population. We also know based on the data that elementary school and secondary school students are lower risk for severe outcomes. With the additional measures put in place by the Ministry of Education, as we navigate this period of time, schools are probably one of the safer settings in the community.

"The reality is there are going to be cases that pop up here and there, potentially in and out of the school settings. I'd also add the infeasibility and limited utility of reporting positive cases in the school setting. Given the extent of transmission, the sheer number of people that would be testing positive is one issue and the second piece is now that we're case managing and contact tracing at the highest risk settings it would be difficult to attribute it to the classroom. This shift in focus to severity is about people ensuring that their vaccine status is up to date, their masking, and following all the measures in place to reduce the risk of infection and more specifically to reduce the risk of severity during this time of widespread transmission."

Vaccine coverage and third booster shots have continued to rise in Peel where 3,056,847 doses have been administered. 1,388,183 individuals have one dose, 1,237,035 have both doses, and 431,178 have received their third dose booster.

The Region now has 78.3 per cent of all residents with two dose coverage and 84.1 per cent with single dose. 89.6 per cent of those 12 and older are double vaccinated and 92.8 per cent have initiated the vaccination process?82.6 per cent of all eligible residents (5+) have both doses and 88.8 per cent have one.

In Peel, there have been 9,595 new COVID-19 cases in the last week to bring the total to 159,917. The Region's death count has now risen to 1,070 with 13 new deaths since last week.

Caledon has seen 378 new cases over the last week to bring the Town total to 6,986. There were no new deaths this week with the count staying at 23.

To book a vaccine in the Region of Peel, visit www.peelregion.ca/coronavirus/vaccine/book-appointment/. To schedule a third dose booster, visit covid19.ontariohealth.ca/.

To download or print a copy of your proof of vaccination, visit <https://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/.