

Stay home over Easter as Caledon sees 'significant resurgence,' says Dr. Loh

By **ROB PAUL**

Local Journalism

Initiative Reporter

With the Easter weekend arriving and COVID-19 cases continuing to rise in Peel Region, experts are asking residents to stay vigilant and continue to do what they must to stay safe.

There have been 70,915 total cases in Peel as of March 31. 3.8 per cent of the cases are in the Caledon area with 641 total deaths. There have been 128,550 total doses of the vaccine administered in Peel with 104,527 of them being first doses and 24,023 being second doses.

Caledon Council met with Peel Public Health's Medical Officer Dr. Lawrence Loh on Tuesday for an update on the COVID-19 situation in the community heading into the long weekend.

'I certainly hope especially with the arrival of vaccines in our community that we will see changes in patterns, hopefully if allocations and supply continue to improve in the next few months, we will see a significant change to both the nature of the pandemic as well as the potential measures hopefully by the summer,' said Dr. Loh.

'That said, we are seeing a significant resurgence of the pandemic in our community. In the Town of Caledon, the incidence rate is now at 144.8 per 100,000 just shy of the average across Peel at 158.9 per 100,000. The test positivity in Caledon is at 7.7 per cent, compared to the rest of Peel which is at 11.2 per cent. Of the total number of cases that have been screened for variants of concern, there are now 20 confirmed variants of concern among Caledon residents and 173 that have screened positive for a mutation of interest. Having stayed in the Grey (lockdown) measures within in Peel has blunted the increase compared to other jurisdiction throughout the rest of Ontario.'

With vaccines continuing to rollout, Loh warns that with the danger of the variants and cases continuing to increase in the Region, it could force focus away from vaccinations as health care resource are put towards saving lives.

'This pandemic is unfortunately far from over,' he said. 'We are seeing younger people being admitted and usually they're sicker and they're staying longer. We're at 60 to 65 per cent variants and the challenge when it becomes a greater proportion of your share of positive cases is that you know it's more transmissible.'

Loh is encouraging people to stay home over the Easter weekend and continue to follow medical advice in limiting interactions to help cut the COVID cases down and keep the re-opening schedule on track.

'Outdoor dining and outdoor fitness can occur; we're really encouraging people to favour the outdoors because we know transmission is diminished outdoors and that masking and distancing are adhered to while limiting the duration of time spent with individuals who you do not live with,' he said.

'I know personal service settings are scheduled to open April 12, I'm certainly hoping that the situation will plateau or stabilize to support that, but that's something we're continuing to monitor. Anything that gets further [opened] will result in increased contact and interactions, which may result in transmission. When you open more of the community, you're opening more contact and interactions which can lead to more COVID-19 transmissions, especially if proximity and masking are a challenge. But remember, the outdoors is low risk, not no risk.'

Although the COVID-19 case load is cause for concern, Loh said the vaccine situation in Peel is continuing to trend positively and they've shown they have the capacity to deliver high numbers of vaccine in the Region as long as the supply is there.

He also asked Peel residents visit peelregion.ca/coronavirus/vaccine for updated information on vaccine eligibility and direction to booking sites.

"While we're still in a period of supply management; we are now starting to see an increase in consistency and an overall increase in volumes in vaccine supply," said Loh. "This is in line with the Federal government's originally announced schedule with the bulk of our vaccines arriving in April, May, and June. I'm hopeful that if our allocations continue to increase over the next weeks, we will be able to move through our various priority groups. Last Friday, we had our most significant day of delivering vaccines in the Region of Peel—almost 8,000 doses of vaccine. One out of 10 doses delivered in Ontario that day was delivered in Peel."

Councillor Tony Rosa raised his concerns to Loh about the outbreaks in schools in Peel, and what to expect with the April break around the corner and if it's safe for students to be in classrooms.

"We continue to monitor cases, outbreaks, and trends in schools very carefully," Loh said. "We're continuing discussions with our school board partners, but the ultimate decision would be made by the Ministry of Education as whether they would be changing the modes of learning. Schools have been safe in terms of the measures in place, and they have actually limited transmission, but the challenge is with the variants being more transmissible, so where this is a lapse or exposure there are more people that may be impacted."

Rosa also mentioned he's heard from seniors in the community about how effective having one dose is and if they should still follow the strict precautions recommended for the unvaccinated.

"Usually, it takes three to four weeks to derive the protection from the first dose of the vaccine," said Loh. "At this point because the vaccine is so new and our community transmission rates are still where they are, the recommendation remains to adhere to the precautions. Once we get to a specific threshold in our community transmission, a lot of these measures can start to loosen."

With recent news surrounding the AstraZeneca vaccine, multiple Councillors asked Loh to clear up the situation and ensure it's safe for residents to receive.

"Having worked in vaccine safety previously, I know that when there are adverse effects that are identified, usually there's an abundance of caution and they move quickly to identify how it may have been caused by the vaccine," said Loh. "At this point there has been no causal link that has been confirmed in Canada. I would stress that any vaccines that have been approved in general, are vaccines that I continue to have confidence in, in terms of the safety and effectiveness. Our encouragement to any resident is if you have the opportunity and are eligible for the vaccine, please take the first vaccine you're offered. The sooner we all get vaccinated, the sooner we all get out of this. I don't share the concerns that have been raised in the public."

Now that the variants have become an issue in Caledon, Mayor Allan Thompson is asking residents to remain cautious and safe over the Easter weekend and continue to follow health recommendations so things can return to normal.

"It's concerning to see where these numbers are going," said Thompson. "I know we're maybe in a better direction in Caledon, but it's still a concern for all of us and we've got to be extremely diligent."

With that in mind, the Ontario government extended booking for COVID-19 vaccination appointments to individuals aged 70 and over through its online booking system and call centre in 11 public health units—including Peel Public Health—on March 29.

As of March 27, 2021, over three-quarters of Ontario residents aged 80 and over have received at least one dose. Over a third of residents aged 75 to 79 have now received their first shot.

In Peel, adults 70 and over, Indigenous adults 18 and older, and active health care workers are eligible to book vaccination appointments.

Eligible individuals can schedule a vaccine appointment by visiting [Ontario.ca/bookvaccine](https://ontario.ca/bookvaccine), or by calling the Provincial Vaccine Information Line number at 1-888-999-6488. The Provincial Vaccine Information Line is open Monday to Sunday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and can provide assistance in 300 languages.