

Vaccine expansion welcomed by medical community

By Brock Weir

Significant expansion in eligibility and availability of COVID-19 vaccines last week have been welcomed by the medical community.

Effective last Thursday, July 14, all Ontarians 18+ are now eligible for their second COVID-19 booster shot, their fourth in the full vaccine programs. Also on Thursday, Health Canada announced its approval of a Moderna vaccine for children between the ages of six months and five years.

"As we continue to manage COVID-19 for the long term, we're expanding second booster doses and extending the availability of free rapid antigen tests to give people the tools they need to stay safe and to ensure Ontario stays open," said Health Minister Sylvia Jones in a statement. "Vaccines continue to be our best defence against COVID-19 and protecting our hospital capacity for those who need it most."

Second booster doses are being offered at an interval of five months after an individual receives their first booster dose, the Province noted, adding that people between the ages of 18 to 59 will still have "strong protection" more than six months after their first booster.

"Expanding second booster dose eligibility will ensure that Ontarians can make an informed decision based on their personal circumstances," said the Ontario Government in a statement. "A new bivalent COVID-19 vaccine is anticipated to be approved by Health Canada this fall, which may offer more targeted protection against the Omicron variants. Ontarians are encouraged to speak with their health care provider about whether getting a second booster dose now is right for them."

Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health for Ontario, said expanding booster eligibility will "empower Ontarians to make the best decisions for their circumstances and help keep our communities safe."

"Staying up to date on vaccination is the best protection against severe outcomes from COVID-19," he said.

The rapid expansion as Ontario settled into a seventh wave of COVID-19 was warmly received by Dr. Charmaine van Schaik, Physician Leader of the Maternal Child Program at Southlake Regional Health Centre.

Dr. van Schaik, who has been the hospital's point person in answering questions about COVID-19 vaccines, said she believes the increased availability will be "really helpful" for individuals who have been waiting, whether they're people who have had a longer period since their initial booster dose or if they are people with various health conditions that have made them feel uneasy with the time period and waning immunity.

"I think it will be a great opportunity for them to be boosted and have less opportunity for illness or severity of illness with the next wave that is coming," she said on Thursday. "For the rest of the population, in time it will be very effective. We're still seeing a lot of positivity, new positivity, even just in the healthcare sector vis a vis our staffing, etc. What we see coming through the emergency room is obvious but people who have been vaccinated before, had illness or are still finding? it will be optimising in that way to reduce that."

That being said, however, Dr. van Schaik said "realistically" the buy-in on the latest booster won't be the same as it was during the initial primary series of vaccines, but getting it is still strongly recommended because it reduces people experiencing severe illness from COVID-19 and helps ease the strain being felt by hospitals.

"It's not just affecting healthcare, but all sectors of the workforce in terms of staffing and illness," she said.

Now that there is a vaccine approved for the youngest of the population, Dr. van Schiak said the world of pediatrics is "excited" and it has been a long time coming.

"I know a lot of families that continued to ask when it was going to become available," she said. "I think now that it is there, there will certainly be an uptake in that population. There will still be questions and hesitancy and we're here to support that and help guide people through the process. I do think it is a great opportunity for our younger children. COVID and respiratory viruses in general affect them as well, so the opportunity to have their health improved is excellent. We're still seeing a lot of respiratory illness right now, COVID included, and it is in the younger children. Where we can minimize that, the likelihood of them having to present to hospital, be admitted, or have the various complexities of treatment that exists, that's a win for us."

If you're still feeling vaccine hesitancy, Dr. van Schaik said there has been "a lot of misinformation" floating around and "deciphering through that" can be difficult. She encourages residents to seek out "quality sources of information, not to get into the weeds," and consult their primary care provider to get a full picture.

"What is important is that people feel comfortable," she said. "We're here to provide that essence of establishing comfort through information and conversation, and that's what's important."