



SPECIAL STATEMENT FROM

SIMCOE MUSKOKA DISTRICT HEALTH UNIT'S

MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH, **DR. CHARLES GARDNER**

March 23, 2022

To those who live, work and visit Simcoe Muskoka:

On March 11, 2022, we reached a significant milestone – the two-year anniversary of COVID-19 being declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). Now recognized in Canada as the [National Day of Observance for COVID-19](#), this day served to remind us of the long duration of this pandemic, and of the serious strain and stress it has placed upon us as individuals and as a society. COVID-19 has taken its toll on all of us in many ways, with over 36,000 reported cases (and countless more unreported cases) and more than 400 deaths to date in Simcoe Muskoka. Many have endured severe infection requiring hospital care, prolonged health effects, and many others have lost loved ones. There would have been numerous more infections and deaths without public health measures - the self-identification, testing and isolation of cases and contacts, mask use in indoor public spaces and workplaces, capacity limits and restrictions on businesses and workplaces, and the vaccination of the great majority of the population. These measures have been difficult to bear, impacting on us all, including on our financial, educational, physical and mental well-being. It has been through the collective efforts of all of you that we have managed the pandemic and limited its impacts. I commend you all, the citizens of Simcoe Muskoka, the staff of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU), and the many health care agencies, municipalities, businesses, organizations, and volunteers who have come together to manage this crisis. I express my sorrow for the hardship, illness and death that has taken place.

Two years in we are now experiencing a dramatic shift in the province's response to the pandemic, as more and more public health measures are eased, and we move towards a 'learning to live with COVID-19' approach. Recently in Ontario (as in several other provinces) all capacity limits for indoor and outdoor settings were lifted, proof of vaccination is no longer required, and the guidelines for isolation were revised to be less stringent based on vaccination status. On March 21, 2022, all masking requirements were lifted in all settings except in public transportation, healthcare, long-term care and other congregate settings. These changes are happening with the decline in transmission and hospitalization that has taken place following the peak of the fifth wave of COVID-19 – arguably the most severe pandemic wave to date due to the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

Although public safety measures have been lifted, we must remember that learning to live with COVID-19 does not mean that it is gone or that the pandemic is over. We are still experiencing a substantial amount of transmission in our communities. With the easing of public health measures there is the potential for some increase in transmission in the weeks to come.

With the Omicron variant, transmission can still occur among those vaccinated (although this is reduced with a booster dose, and two and three dose vaccination does substantially reduce the risk of severity). Mask use,



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physical distancing, ensuring HVAC systems are maintained and in good working order and hand washing (or the application of alcohol hand rub) are relatively simple ways to help reduce risk. Self-isolating when ill is still needed to prevent spread to others. **I strongly urge and recommend that all people continue to employ these measures to help protect yourselves, those around you and those you love from COVID-19.**

There are many in our communities who are at high risk of severity and death; your actions can help protect them from getting the virus while protecting yourself. This disease is still actively circulating in our communities and still requires our ongoing attention. I also ask all Simcoe Muskoka residents to be patient, kind and compassionate towards others, respecting their choice *whether or not they* continue to wear a mask in public and to take the other precautions that I have advised, and to respect the choice of businesses and organizations that may keep in place policies requiring these measures.

With the ongoing transmission that we see, it is very important that people receive all vaccination doses for which they are eligible. Although more than 80% of our eligible population is vaccinated with their first and second dose, there is still a percentage who have not been vaccinated, and almost half (47%) of those eligible have not received a booster dose. A booster does help to reduce the risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 and transmitting to others, and it provides better protection against severe illness than the primary vaccination series.

I believe that we are likely to experience a significant reduction in transmission later in the spring and summer. However, new and potentially more transmissible variants of concern of COVID-19 may arise at any point, and due to its seasonality it is likely that we will also see some increased COVID-19 transmission in the fall and winter to come. Given this, going forward it is important for our well-being to take the opportunities we have to spend time with family and friends during periods of reduced spread, while being prepared for future increases in transmission. As warmer weather approaches, we can take advantage of these occasions in a safer way knowing that being outdoors, while taking the other precautions, will reduce the risk of transmission.

The pandemic has been extremely difficult for us all. However, through our collective and individual actions to abide by public health measures including vaccination, we have prevented many more cases, hospitalizations and deaths from occurring and I commend the people in Simcoe Muskoka for this.

Sincerely,

Dr. Charles Gardner
Medical Officer of Health
Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit