

Respiratory Season Update #2

High COVID and RSV Activity and Increased COVID Hospitalizations and Deaths

Attention: Physicians, Hospital, Infection Control Practitioner, Walk-In urgent Care Clinic, Nurse Practitioner, Health Unit – Neighboring, Ontario Health, Hospital Occupational Health, EMS, Midwives, Community Health Centre, Family Health Team, Indigenous Healthcare & Community, Long Term Care, Retirement Home, Hospice, Congregate Care, Ontario Health Teams

Date: November 27, 2023

The 2023-2024 respiratory season is well underway. COVID and RSV activity are high with test percent positivity of 21% and 18% respectively. Influenza activity remains low but is expected to increase in the next few weeks.

- Locally, over the last four (4) weeks, there has been a noted increase in COVID-19 related hospitalizations and deaths.
- Since September 2023, there have been 39 deaths in which COVID-19 is either the underlying cause of or has contributed to the death.
- All but one of the 39 deaths were in persons 65 years or older. Thirty-one of the 39 deaths had not received a COVID vaccine since September 2022. Only one (1) person received this Fall's COVID XBB vaccine although it was less than ten (10) days before the date of death.

Please encourage your patients, particularly those who are older or with medical conditions, to get their COVID and influenza immunizations and to test for COVID when symptomatic and seek potential [antiviral treatment](#) if they are 60 years or older or have medical conditions.

COVID-19 Community Risk Level now in the High Category

For the first time in the 2023-2024 season, as a result of the increase in COVID-19 related illness and severity, the COVID-19 Community Risk Level is in the high category. The risk level is based



on five (5) indicators (percent positivity of PRC tests, local cases, hospitalizations, institutional outbreaks, and wastewater surveillance). Together, these indicators make up the current overall COVID-19 risk level in our community as one of the following: lower, moderate, high or very high. Four (4) of the five (5) indicators are demonstrating high rates of COVID disease which puts the level at high. You can find the tool [here](#) on the SMDHU website and it is updated weekly.

Weekly Respiratory Virus Update

The Weekly Respiratory Virus Update (WRVU) is posted weekly until April 2024. The WRVU shares the most recent week's local influenza and COVID-19 activity throughout the respiratory season, providing an overview of circulating respiratory viruses. This update can be found on the SMDHU website [here](#).

COVID-19 and Influenza Immunization

Immunization continues to be the best way to combat serious illness, hospitalization and death from COVID-19 and Influenza. To reduce the risk of becoming ill and protect those closest to us, it is important that everyone uses multiple layers of protection such as staying home until you are fever-free, wear a well-fitting mask if you can't stay home, avoiding non-essential mask-less activities for ten (10) days from when symptoms started and avoiding visits with those who are at high-risk of severe illness. For more information about multiple layers of protection and vaccine access in our area, please refer to the SMDHU [COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunization](#) webpages.

Please review the recent [Public Health Alerts](#) related to SMDHU's vaccination campaigns this fall.

COVID-19 Testing and Treatment

For guidance on COVID-19 treatment such as Paxlovid™ and remdesivir, go to [Ontario Health's website](#). A positive rapid antigen test (RAT) is sufficient as the lab component of the diagnosis. **Health care providers can order and provide RATs to their patients and employees free of charge.** Health care providers do not need to screen patients for eligibility. Ordering pathways for health care providers will continue to be through the [PPE Supply Portal](#). For assistance with creating or accessing an account, or for questions about orders and shipment, contact sco.supplies@ontario.ca.

RAT kits are also available to the public for free at SMDHU. Test kits can be picked up at all [health unit offices](#) (**excluding** the Barrie clinic at 80 Bradford Street) during regular business hours.

Please consider pre-discussing/informing your patients who would benefit from treatment and providing a prescription in advance of them being infected and testing positive for COVID-19. This would decrease the delay for patients to start on treatment, particularly given Paxlovid™ should be started within five (5) days of symptom onset.