



Important Public Health Alert #2: COVID-19 + Omicron

To: Chiefs, Health Directors, Pandemic Leads

Date: December 22, 2021

The COVID-19 situation is changing very quickly. Omicron, the new Variant of Concern, is spreading rapidly and is currently the dominant Variant of Concern in Ontario. There is the possibility that demand for extra nursing support in communities may exceed the number of nurses available. Projections show that Omicron could overwhelm both hospitals and public health's capacity to keep up with case and contact management throughout the province.

Based on the success of Ontario First Nations in protecting community members, including their most vulnerable, from infection during the previous COVID-19 waves, we are providing the following urgent recommendations. These recommendations are made to limit the introduction and spread of Omicron within First Nations communities. We must continue to be on guard and proactive in our efforts.

Although we are still learning more about Omicron, so far we know that:

- It spreads more quickly than previous variants.
- Two doses of the vaccine are not as protective against Omicron infection compared to previous forms of COVID, but do offer protection against serious illness and hospitalization.
- Three doses of the vaccine significantly improve protection from Omicron infection.

Vaccination

- The most important thing that can be done to protect vulnerable members of the community is to ensure that all eligible members of the community have three (3) doses of vaccine at recommended time intervals.
- For those community members not yet eligible for the third dose, having two vaccine doses will give them the best protection against serious disease and hospitalization if they contract Omicron.
- Let your community members know where they can get the vaccine.

Preparation

- Activate your pandemic team if it is not already active.
- Check stock of essential supplies, such as PPE, and order more, if needed.
- The needs-based portion of the Indigenous Community Support Fund (ICSF) and the Public Health Measures Fund remain available to support Indigenous communities and organizations, both on- and off-reserve, to prepare, prevent and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Click [here](#) to access the funding request form for the ICSF.
 - The funding request form for the Public Health Measures Fund can be accessed through the OneHealthPortal under funding. Click [here](#).
- Prepare community testing sites, if applicable.
- Prepare isolation sites.



Travel Restrictions

- Consider closing the community – this was an effective measure in earlier waves of the pandemic to keep COVID-19 out of communities.
- Monitor community borders.
- Travel out of community only if absolutely necessary, e.g., an urgent medical appointment.
- All individuals entering or returning to remote communities should self-isolate for 10 days upon return whether they have been vaccinated or not.
- In remote communities, test everyone upon entering community and seven (7) days after arrival.

Gatherings

- Consider canceling gatherings altogether or gathering virtually instead; avoid visiting other households.
- If gatherings in person do occur, limit gathering size to 10 people who have received at least two vaccine doses from as few households as possible.
- Cancel sporting events.
- For those who have traveled outside of their communities recently, it is recommended they not attend gatherings.

Public Health Messaging

- Communicate with your community members on what they can do to protect themselves, their family, and their community (including vaccination, limiting gathering, social distancing, masking, hand washing, and staying home when sick or if you are a close contact).
- These messages may need to be communicated through notices at the Band Office, Facebook postings, direct emails, or radio messages.
- It is important to use appropriate masks: medical masks or 3-layer cloth masks, with consideration for N95 masks if you are immunocompromised or looking after someone with COVID-19.

Services

- Only essential services should remain open, including medical and mental health services.
- Schools should review current pandemic protocols and be prepared to switch to online learning, if necessary.
- Work from home if possible.
- Increase infection prevention and control measures in schools and workplaces.

The situation is changing rapidly and further updates and recommendations will be provided as necessary in the coming days and weeks. Changes may need to be made to current practices and protocols, such as case notification and contact tracing protocols, as the situation evolves. Indigenous Services Canada is committed to continuing to support First Nation communities in their response to COVID-19.

Respectfully,

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