

ISSUED: January 31, 2022

TO: All Owners, Operators and Persons Responsible for businesses, and organizations where people are employed or volunteer (i.e. 'workplaces') in the City of Peterborough and/or County of Peterborough

RE: Medical Officer of Health Recommendation to Work from Home

The geographical region served by Peterborough Public Health (PPH) and the Province of Ontario as a whole continue to experience high rates of transmission of COVID-19, primarily as a result of the Omicron variant of concern.¹ The Omicron variant is more than 4 times as transmissible than the Delta variant², which is more than twice as transmissible than the original SARS-CoV-2 virus. Plainly, "the current risk of Omicron transmission in Ontario is high."³ Due to provincial testing limitations, case counts are greatly underrepresented compared to what is actually occurring in the community.⁴ For that reason, we need to look at other indicators to get a better idea of the risk to our residents.

- Wastewater surveillance data indicates an alarmingly high prevalence of COVID-19 in our area.⁵
- For the week of January 16 to January 22, 2022 in the area served by PPH, there were 201 cases per 100,000 residents, compared to all of Ontario that saw 295 cases per 100,000 residents.⁶
- Hospitalizations continue to stretch health care resources both locally and provincially. On January 27, 2022 there were 21 in-patients with COVID-19 at PRHC⁷ and across the province there are 3,768 current in-patients with COVID-19.⁸
- Increased transmission has also led to a local increase mortality, with 19 deaths in 2022 in the area served by PPH.⁹
- The area served by PPH is the second oldest per capita in the all of Ontario, and fifth oldest in all of Canada¹⁰, meaning that our population is more vulnerable due to the age of local residents, and subsequently more at risk for complications due to COVID-19.¹¹

Monitoring local and provincial data will continue to guide the work of PPH and inform our direction and recommendations. The province is set to begin gradually easing public health measures and reopening many sectors today, January 31.¹² Many of the sectors slated to re-open are considered higher risk settings due to the nature of the activity taking place at the facility, the length of time patrons stays inside the facility, and the public health measures that may be forgone for a period of time (i.e. removing one's mask to partake in an approved activity like eating or exercising).¹³

When Ontario enters "Step 3" on January 31, the mandate for employees to work from home, will no longer be a legislated requirement. With that said, in the strongest terms possible, **I, Dr. Thomas Piggott, Medical Officer of Health for Peterborough Public Health, am recommending that persons responsible for workplaces ensure that all employees who are able to work from home, continue to do so.** I believe that between schools reopening, extra-curricular activities resuming, and many other settings welcoming patrons back, coupled with the high transmissibility of Omicron, returning employees to a workplace, especially when they are already equipped to work from home, is too much, too soon. The virus doesn't move, we move the virus, and continuing to work from home is one strategy we can employ to protect our community. Ideally, this will cause minimal disruption considering this strategy has already been in use over the last several weeks.

Staff who are unable to work remotely, and must return to their workspace are encouraged to:

- wear a tight-fitting mask that completely covers their nose, mouth and chin,
- work in an area away from others
- increase ventilation by opening windows and doors (where doing so won't interfere with HVAC operations),
- stagger schedules to reduce the number of people in the workplace at one time, and
- adjust schedules to [reduce the number of people taking breaks and lunches](#) at the same time.

In addition, continuing to work from home is another way to protect your employees as required by employer obligations under the [Occupational Health and Safety Act](#), and reduces the likelihood of having to shutdown your business or workplace as a result of high absenteeism due to staff illness or a workplace outbreak.

Ensuring that residents don't acquire COVID-19 is one way to keep the economy open and reduce the pressures on our already strained health care system. Employers are urged to heed this recommendation, and encourage or permit employees to continue to work from home. Note that we will be monitoring the local situation in line with Ontario's reopening plan, and take increased action, progressing to an enforceable Letter of Instruction under the Reopening Ontario (A Flexible Response to COVID-19) Act, 2020, if necessary.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

Dr. Thomas Piggott, MD MSc CCFP FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health and Chief Executive Officer

¹ Jüni P, da Costa BR, Maltsev A, Katz GM, Perkhun A, Yan S, Bodmer NS. Ontario dashboard. Science Briefs of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.47326/ocsat.dashboard.2021.1.0>

² Public Health Ontario. EVIDENCE BRIEF COVID-19 Variant of Concern Omicron (B.1.1.529): Risk Assessment, January 19, 2022. Retrieved January 27, 2022 from https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/voc/2022/01/covid-19-omicron-b11529-risk-assessment-jan-19.pdf?sc_lang=fr

³ Ibid.

⁴ Public Health Ontario. EVIDENCE BRIEF COVID-19 Variant of Concern Omicron (B.1.1.529): Risk Assessment, January 19, 2022. Retrieved January 27, 2022 from https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/voc/2022/01/covid-19-omicron-b11529-risk-assessment-jan-19.pdf?sc_lang=fr

⁵ Peterborough public Health. Peterborough Public Health Media Briefing Jan 27/22 (Live Streamed) Retrieved on January 27, 2022 from <https://www.youtube.com/user/PCCHUHealthUnit/videos>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Peterborough Regional Health Centre. COVID-19 NEWS AND INFORMATION Retrieved on January 27, 2022 from <https://www.prhc.on.ca/about-us/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/>

⁸ Jüni P, da Costa BR, Maltsev A, Katz GM, Perkhun A, Yan S, Bodmer NS. Ontario dashboard. Science Briefs of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, Hospital Occupancy 2022. <https://doi.org/10.47326/ocsat.dashboard.2021.1.0>

⁹ Public Health Ontario. Ontario COVID-19 Data Tool. Retrieved on January 31, 2022 from <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/data-and-analysis/infectious-disease/covid-19-data-surveillance/covid-19-data-tool?tab=trends>

¹⁰ City of Peterborough. 2019 City of Peterborough Residential Monitoring Report. Retrieved on January 31, 2022 from <https://www.peterborough.ca/en/doing-business/resources/Documents/Residential-Monitoring-Reports/2019-RMR.pdf>

¹¹ Health Canada. People who are at risk of more severe disease or outcomes from COVID-19. Retrieved on January 31, 2022 from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/people-high-risk-for-severe-illness-covid-19.html>

¹² Province of Ontario. Ontario Outlines Steps to Cautiously and Gradually Ease Public Health Measures, January 20 Retrieved on January 27 from <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1001451/ontario-outlines-steps-to-cautiously-and-gradually-ease-public-health-measures>

¹³ Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Focus on: risk assessment approach for COVID-19 contact tracing. Version 2. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2021. Retrieved January 27, 2022 from <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/main/2020/09/covid-19-contact-tracing-risk-assessment.pdf?la=en>