

COVID-19's peak? expected to last for weeks, continuing closures

Pandemic could continue well into next year until a vaccine is developed: Health Unit

As Ontarians heed calls from the government to stay indoors and socially distance to prevent COVID-19's spread, many are left wondering when will it end?

The Province has been on lockdown for a month now with all non-essential workplaces closed and Premier Doug Ford announced Monday this will continue until modelling for the virus' curve starts to decrease.

Simcoe Muskoka Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Charles Gardner, said the present surge of cases is still mounting.

"People should think in terms of weeks for the present surge and for the whole pandemic to take place well into next year, until we get a vaccine waxing and waning over time," he noted.

Dr. Gardner said Ontarians' ability to prevent the spread of COVID-19 will determine its severity and duration. If there's poor compliance and it's evident that the rate of infection is not curbing, a full lockdown may be declared by the province, he noted.

What's key for avoiding a worse case scenario is abiding by physical distancing measures, as the source of infection for Simcoe County's cases shifts from travel to community acquired.

Out of New Tecumseth's 18 cases, only one is from travel, seven are community acquired, eight came from community contact, and one is under investigation.

Across the board in Simcoe Muskoka, 48 cases are travel related, 58 are close contacts, and 45 are community acquired.

"That speaks to the shift that is happening," said Dr. Gardner. "People coming into the country, are certainly higher risk for transmission, for being cases . . . but we also know there's transmission happening in our communities."

"I believe at this point of time the true number of community-acquired cases would probably be much bigger than the number of travel related cases as this transmits through the community," he added.

Dr. Gardner said through COVID-19 surveillance it has become clear that there are a number of cases the health unit isn't aware of in the community, as capacity for testing has been limited in the past, but this ability is now expanding.

"The ability of our laboratory system to do testing has greatly improved," he noted.

"The Premier has made this a priority and the criteria for testing has been broad, and considerably with much more of a focus on intensive testing in long-term care facilities to protect them as a vulnerable population."

Over the weekend, three new cases were confirmed at Bradford Valley Care Community, bringing its total to 23 among residents and six among staff.

22 are currently in self isolation at the long-term care facility and some residents are becoming seriously ill. So far, one resident has passed away.

"We are quite concerned indeed about that outbreak, we know that a number of those cases are now having fairly severe symptoms, so indeed we are monitoring closely," Dr. Gardner said.

"Although we certainly hope for the best, we do know that this is a dangerous virus that can hit elderly people very hard and the potential for a death in these situations is high."

When looking at the broader picture, Simcoe Muskoka had 159 confirmed cases and 62 recovered, as of Tuesday.

There are 12 individuals currently hospitalized, 50 self-isolating, and nine have passed, all of whom were over 70.

Individuals age 35-64 are most effected by COVID-19 in the region, with 66 cases, followed by people 65 and up accounting for 57 cases. There have been only three cases for those under 17 and 33 cases for individuals age 18-34.

The case fatality rate is 5.3 percent in Simcoe Muskoka and 3.9 percent across the province.

Dr. Gardner said the 1.2 percent difference isn't statistically significant enough to say the county is experiencing higher rates of infection than the rest of Ontario.

While the elderly are most at risk for COVID-19, and effected more severely, no is immune, he stressed.

"There have been younger people that have been severely effected and hospitalized, in the intensive care unit, or even ventilated," Dr. Gardner noted.

"It is important to know that we're all vulnerable, it's not just a matter of taking these measures to prevent transmission through you and beyond to others, but also for your own protection ? protecting yourself, because none of us are invincible when it comes to this," he added.

In contrast, certain carriers of the novel coronavirus can have little or no symptoms, which means those without symptoms can still infect others, making physical distancing even more important.

While Premier Doug Ford has advised everyone to stay home for anything non-essential, Dr. Gardner said the public should go outside for physical activity, but do so carefully.

"If we're not careful and we end up with a big surge we might find ourselves in a total lockdown," he warned.

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter