

COVID-19 reaching 'peak' in Ontario, reduced controls on the horizon

Premier Doug Ford said COVID-19 appears to be peaking in Ontario and there's potential to relax control measures down the road.

The Premier offered this view during an announcement on Monday.

Simcoe Muskoka Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Charles Gardner said while Ontario is making 'excellent progress,' people still need to follow directives that are currently in place.

'This could come back again and surge if we relax too quickly,' he noted. 'It's still circulating in our community, the potential for it is still there, it's the control measures that we're doing together that's making the difference now'

Dr. Gardner is involved with Ontario's working group that's currently deciding the indicators for when to lower existing protective measures.

'I don't think anybody has the definitive answer' but it's certainly not too soon to be asking when and how we will do it,' he said.

Some of the indicators to help determine when to reopen Ontario include the prevalence of COVID-19, overall number of cases, the number of new cases confirmed each day, and the amount of time it takes for overall case counts to double.

'Everything needs to be coming down not going up, so you have to be beyond the peak and well down before you'd be considering backing away from controls,' Dr. Gardner explained. 'We would also need to know that our system would be ready if you backed away from controls and then had a resurgence of cases.'

Efforts to increase healthcare facilities capacity ramped up as COVID-19 began effecting Canada and it's crucial for the system to have adequate ICU capacity and ventilators before lifting the Province's current controls, said Dr. Gardner.

'Flattening the curve' doesn't mean fewer Canadians will catch COVID-19, but the staggering of cases allows for the healthcare system to not be overwhelmed.

When control measures are lifted by Ontario, Dr. Gardner said the public health system will have to closely monitor the situation to detect early signs of an incoming surge of cases.

'I think you would probably begin by relaxing your controls in areas that are potentially least harmful,' he noted.

Dr. Gardner said for long term care facilities, it's important to hold off on relaxing protective measures, as the elderly are most susceptible to COVID-19.

He also noted that as Ontario's directives are lifted it's important for the public to understand that they may be reapplied if there's evidence that the virus is coming back.

There have been 215 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Simcoe Muskoka with roughly half recovered, 12 hospitalizations, and 14 deaths, as of press time.

The majority of cases are community acquired, with a total of 74, followed by travel at 51, close contact at 47, and close contact in a long-term care facility is 30.

There are 21 confirmed cases in New Tecumseth.

"With it transmitting in the community? we all need to be doing the physical distancing to flatten that curve and dampen down that transmission," Dr. Gardner explained.

At Bradford Valley, a neighbouring long-term care facility, there have been 10 staff who tested positive as well as 28 residents, while 208 others tested negative.

There's been a total of four deaths among residents.

"A number of other individuals are quite ill so we certainly watch with concern as to how they do," said Dr. Gardner.

Premier Doug Ford has expressed concerns around COVID-19 outbreaks in long-term care facilities and the related deaths.

The Province, in conjunction with the region, has launched a strategy using resources of hospitals, emergency services, and other agencies to develop teams that directly support long term care homes.

"Public health is very much involved in this since we have authority to respond to outbreaks in long-term care facilities," Dr. Gardner noted.

In terms of developing provincial strategies for reopening Ontario, he said it's important to look at what's being written by other public health experts nationally and internationally.

"We have the potential to learn from other countries that are getting to do this, whether it's Spain allowing construction to happen again or whether it would be Denmark having children go back to school but with strict social, physical distancing in place," he said.

"We have China relaxing some of its controls, including in Wuhan where it all began," Dr. Gardner continued. "We have the potential to learn from their experience as we move in this direction."

While rates of infection are plateauing, they're not yet on the decline, so it's too soon to set a date for when control measures will be lifted, but Dr. Gardner noted it's important to start looking at when and how this will occur.

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