

COVID Alert notification app now available in Ontario

Surveillance of COVID-19 has been the government's focus for controlling rates of infection and, to aid those efforts, a smartphone app was rolled out in Ontario.

The COVID Alert app launched Friday and sends out notices if somebody's been exposed to a person who later tests positive for COVID-19, using Bluetooth technology.

The app is voluntary and can be downloaded for free on both Apple or Android devices. A few days after the launch, it passed one million downloads and Premier Doug Ford has been urging people to get it downloaded.

"This important, made-in-Ontario COVID Alert app will be a critical part of our case and contact management strategy as more regions in Ontario enter Stage 3," said Premier Ford.

"This innovative tool was developed by some of the best and brightest minds in our province, working in partnership with Ottawa. As businesses open their doors and schools prepare for September, we need to help stop the spread and keep others safe by downloading this COVID Alert app."

The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) is currently in charge of contact tracing and its staff interviews individuals who tested positive for COVID-19 to then track down the people they've been exposed to.

"I think the value of an app like this may very well be to help find other people that the individuals in question couldn't identify and didn't think of or weren't aware of who could have been in close proximity to them," explained SMDHU Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Charles Gardner.

He said the app may be beneficial for ensuring SMDHU isn't missing any potential contacts for follow up, as testing often captures only a portion of those affected.

"All along we've known that surveillance picks up the tip of the iceberg, sometimes were only picking up 10 per cent or less of the cases out there," Dr. Gardner noted.

"We know from studies done in the United States and Europe that the prevalence of COVID-19 can be 10 times or more greater than the number of cases found through the acute testing that had been done."

This has been proven through zero prevalence studies, which determine if somebody previously had COVID-19 through antibody testing.

The asymptomatic nature of COVID-19 contributes to the problem of accurately capturing who has it.

Blood Services Canada released some preliminary figures late last month showing about one per cent of the Canadian population had antibodies from COVID-19.

This means out of the 500,000 people living in Simcoe Muskoka, around 5,000 people could have been infected by COVID-19, but only around 10 per cent of cases were confirmed through testing.

Around 650 people have been infected in Simcoe Muskoka since March, so this would be consistent with testing only capturing around one tenth of positive cases, if around 5,000 were actually infected, Dr. Gardner noted.

New Tecumseth has been largely successful in fighting off the virus with just three individuals presently infected as of press time.

July saw the lowest number of cases, with six, while the municipality saw roughly five times the amount in both May and June.

There's been zero COVID-19 deaths in Simcoe Muskoka since May and new hospitalizations are rare.

Dr. Gardner said the public should be proud of their work to reduce infection rates but needs to continue on with the control measures to keep the pandemic under control.

"We don't want the kind of resurgence that's been happening in the United States and is now happening in certain parts of Europe or Asia," he explained.

"We've seen some of it in other provinces as well to limited degrees and we have to continue with our control measures."

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter