

COVID-19 cases rise while hospitalizations remain low in Simcoe Muskoka

The number of COVID-19 cases being reported during the second wave is much larger than the first, yet hospitalizations and deaths associated with the virus are lower across Canada, including Simcoe Muskoka

Simcoe Muskoka Medical Officer of Health Dr. Charles Gardner said the reasons why there was higher mortality in the spring range from the average age of those being infected now to the lack of capacity for testing when the pandemic was starting.

"We've had a younger demographic of people affected by this wave compared with the first wave. With the first wave, there [were] many more long-term care facilities and retirement homes that were affected and that may yet happen, we've had some so far," he explained.

"The other thing is that, in wave one, it's possible that we actually had many more people that were cases, compared with wave two. We had far less of an ability to test people in wave one and so we were probably missing many more cases than we are right now."

New Tecumseth currently has 78 active cases and a total of 254 since the start of the pandemic, while 12 residents have died, 10 of which are associated with the ongoing outbreak at Simcoe Manor.

Simcoe Muskoka is at roughly 1,500 cases with 213 active and six in hospital.

The incidence rate in Simcoe Muskoka is 24 in 100,000, which is about half of the provincial average.

The doubling time for the pandemic is set at roughly two months, so it would take until the end of December to double the total number of cases at its current rate of growth.

One of the transmission patterns the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) is noting as a source of infection is clusters in households.

Large families or student housing, roommate situations, and other groupings for housing can be highly impacted by COVID-19.

"Once it gets into those premises, it can affect a large number of people, there can be a large number of people in those households and that's been one of the things that's been very much a part of the pattern of the outbreak as we see it right now," Dr. Gardner noted.

"There are workplace exposures that are related to these households as well, a number of these individuals work in different settings."

The SMDHU has also seen a pattern of exposure to COVID-19 among healthcare professionals such as physiotherapists, massage therapists and chiropractors not wearing full PPE, lacking a visor.

"For those who provide personal services as well, such as haircutting, it's really important that you wear a mask, wear a visor, protect yourself because the nature of the work can put you at risk, you're in close contact with many people," he explained.

The other thing the SMDHU has noted about work environments is individuals letting their guard down by not wearing face coverings when socializing with co-workers or not properly socially distancing when in lunch rooms, allowing for transmission.

"The other thing would be if you're in a vehicle going to work together that you need to be spaced from each other, somebody in the back seat, the other in the front, window open and wearing a face covering. If you're not from the same household you need to be doing that kind of thing," said Dr. Gardner.

He also stressed the importance of sticking to one's own household for who they are in direct physical contact with.

This advice was neglected this past Thanksgiving in Simcoe Muskoka and resulted in 43 new cases attributed to gatherings associated with the holiday last month.

"What we find is there's a full range of ages affected by this, so while it's primarily young and middle-aged adults who are affected, we also have those who are seniors affected... and they're at the greatest risk, of course, of developing complications," Dr. Gardner said.

"I think this is an important point for people to note because we do have other occasions coming up in the future and we're going to have to be careful again when it comes to avoiding transmission through such gatherings."

For the community to revert back to a Stage 2 reopening, similar to York Region, Peel, Toronto and Ottawa, Dr. Gardner said the local healthcare system would have to be stressed in its capacity.

Currently there is a 27 per cent ICU ventilator bed occupancy and 61.5 per cent ICU bed occupancy, while acute bed occupancy is 87.5 per cent and none of these figures are associated with moderate or high numbers of COVID-19 related patients.

"Hospitals are at a high occupancy right now unrelated to COVID, it's just through standard healthcare that they're at that level," Dr. Gardner said.

"RVH has its COVID Response Unit and that gives them capacity to be able to deal with a surge of at least a moderate size of COVID-19, so that's a resource for all of Simcoe Muskoka," he continued.

"At this point we actually have a very low draw on our hospitals from COVID-19 and I certainly would become more concerned if that changes, if we start to see a great increase in the number of cases admitted to hospital."

Dr. Gardner said it's important for the public to not experience "pandemic fatigue" through the second wave and keep their guard up through physical distancing, hand washing, the use of masks and self-monitoring for any COVID-19 symptoms.

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter