



NEWS

Here's what January could be like if Ontarians ignore COVID-19 restrictions

'I think we're going to see a grotesque spike:' epidemiologist

By [Veronica Appia](#) Toronto.com

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If Ontarians don't stay vigilant about COVID-19 measures over the holidays, especially in the province's hot spots, their actions could have serious repercussions going into the new year, local epidemiologists say.

"We're getting close to the end of the tunnel," Saverio Stranges, professor and chair of the epidemiology department at Western University, said. "This is a time where

people need to downplay their expectations."

Stranges said he is concerned people may let their "pandemic fatigue" take over, and that citizens should be cautious to not think of the holidays as business as usual.

What's the worst that could happen?

Colin Furness, infection control epidemiologist at University of Toronto, said if Ontarians choose to ignore public health guidelines over the holidays, "January, February and March are going to be abysmal."

He said while he hopes his forecast is wrong, he fears that there will be a significant number of residents across the province who forgo restrictions and have get-togethers with friends and family.

"There will be enough people who do that to overwhelm hospitals," he continued.

Martha Fulford, an infectious disease specialist at Hamilton Health Sciences and associate professor at McMaster University, agreed that overwhelming the health-care system would be the worst-case scenario come January.

"If we end up too full, that means we can't do surgeries, we can't do the elective procedures, we are stretched if somebody has a trauma or somebody requires and ICU bed," she said, adding that hospital capacity and ICU numbers are slowly increasing.

"If people can just do their best to follow all the recommendations until we've vaccinated the vulnerable, then essentially we've accomplished the mission of preserving our health-care system."

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When would we start to see a spike?

At some point in January, residents can expect to see a spike in cases or any repercussions of people not complying with restrictions over the holidays.

Furness said Ontarians may start to see hospitals inundated as early as New Year's Day.

"I think we're going to see a grotesque spike," he said. "By the time we're in the first week of January, I think we're going to start to see those numbers climb."

Stranges said this could be the case by mid-January. "There is always that window of time from when you are exposed to when you develop symptoms," he said. "The numbers will potentially escalate after a couple of weeks."

What should I know going into the holidays?

Furness said one important factor for residents to note is that as COVID-19 becomes more prevalent, the force of infection goes up.

This means it will take increasingly less exposure time for someone to become infected with the virus.

"Just getting on the bus becomes less safe, just going into a store becomes less safe, simply continuing to do what you do gets progressively less safe as there is more coronavirus around," he said.

"People need to be really looking around and really mindfully taking stock of their risk and saying, 'Where can I reduce my risk?'"

Fulford agreed, adding that she advises people have a "quieter" season this year.

"You can still have your tree, you can still have your gifts, you can still do fancy gift exchanges, you can do drive-bys," she said. "We can keep our fingers crossed for good weather, because if you could do stuff outdoors, that would be ideal."

Furness said there are two different groups of people affected by the restrictions: those with agency and those without.

He said while some citizens, including many in low-income and racialized communities, are forced to work in essential roles and put themselves in potentially risky situations from day to day, those who have the ability to stay home should be doing their best to protect others.

"COVID is a racist problem, and what I would say to every entitled privileged person

who has agency is, 'Are you jumping on the bandwagon of a racist problem or are you part of the solution?'" he said.

Should I be concerned about the return to school?

Fulford said sending children back to school on Jan. 4 should not be a main concern as case numbers in Ontario schools have not demonstrated an increased risk but rather have been reflective of the population.

Fulford added that, rather, she would be concerned about extending the break, as children would have increased opportunities for socialization in risky settings.

Furness agreed.

"When they're not in school, all those people who don't have agency and all those people who do but choose to be careless, they're going to be mixing their kids together and are going to be doing it without masks, so I think kids, in some ways, will actually have more exposure to COVID outside of school than in," he said.

Stranges added that his main concern about increased socialization is for older students in high school and post-secondary institutions. He said Western University, along with others, have chosen to extend the break until Jan. 11 – a decision he supports.

He said an extra week would afford students and their families the opportunity to have a better concept of the numbers before going back to classes or visiting campus.

Despite these perspectives and despite the provincial government stating last month that winter break would not be extended for students participating in in-person learning, Education Minister Stephen Lecce sent a letter to school boards Dec. 16 advising them to prepare for "all scenarios."

"We are recommending that boards encourage students and staff to take home any materials that they may require for remote learning before they leave school for the holiday period so that we can continue to be ready for all scenarios," the letter reads.

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