

Increase In COVID-19 Cases Stretching Health Unit Capacity

By  Pamela Vanmeer April 18, 2021



Haliburton Kawartha Pine Ridge District Health Unit

KAWARTHA LAKES-The local health unit is joining the growing list of public health agencies “sounding the alarm” about reduced healthcare capacity in response to the recent increase in COVID-19 cases.

Dr. Natalie Bocking, Medical Officer of Health for the Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit says that the recent spike in cases has stretched the capacity of the health unit to its limits, and the organization has had to make some process changes to balance the work involved with new cases while continuing to offer mass immunization clinics in the communities.

“We are doing a bit of a dance right now as we continue to work through new cases while also rolling out our vaccination clinics as we know that, in the long run, the vaccinations will

play a major role in changing the trajectory of the pandemic,”
Dr. Bocking says.

In the past 14 days, HKPR District Health Unit has been notified of 282 confirmed cases and more than 500 high-risk contacts. In addition, the health unit is staffing five mass immunization clinics, investigating eight community outbreaks, responding to 200 to 300 phone calls and emails daily, working with health care partners to set up programs to immunize homebound residents, and working with primary health care providers to implement vaccination of patients.

As a result, the following changes are being made:

- **High-risk contacts:** anyone who is identified as a high-risk contact of a confirmed case will be emailed a letter outlining quarantine and testing requirements. Health Unit staff will continue to work closely with individuals who are confirmed cases. Additional information for high-risk contacts is available on the Health Unit’s website at www.hkpr.on.ca.
- **Call centre:** in order to address the hundreds of phone calls and emails coming into the Health Unit each day, staff have had to prioritize their response. Only urgent or emergency emails and contacts will be responded to quickly. Individuals who call or email to check on when they might be eligible to be vaccinated will not receive a response from the Health Unit. Individuals who have submitted a request for an individual code will also not receive a request from the Health Unit. All individual codes will come from the Ministry of Health.

As well as the work created by additional cases, the Health Unit is experiencing challenges due to decreases in local vaccine delivery while seeing an increase in the number of people now eligible for vaccination. Like elsewhere in the province, expected shipments of the Moderna vaccine have been delayed. The Health Unit will also be receiving less Pfizer vaccine than expected – 3,500 doses a week as opposed to 5,800 doses a week received previously.

“Our goal is to vaccinate as many people as possible, but with expanded eligibility provincially and no additional vaccine to provide locally, we are challenged to offer more clinics for our residents,” Dr. Bocking says.

HKPR District Health Unit does not book appointments without having a vaccine delivery confirmed, she says, so residents who have an appointment will not see those cancelled. Instead, it means the Health Unit will not be able to offer as many new appointments as first planned.

Dr. Bocking says while she understands that everyone is anxious and tired of the shutdown she is pleading with people to follow the provincial Stay-at-Home order and public health recommendations to help stop the spread and reduce the number of local cases. This means staying home unless you need to go out for an essential reason (groceries, work, or medical appointment). As well, people should:

- Stay home if ill, even if you think the symptoms are caused by allergies.
- Continue to keep a distance of more than six feet between yourself and others outside of household family members.
- Wear a mask when out in public, or you are unable to maintain a six feet distance from others when outdoors.
- Stay home except for essential reasons (groceries, medication, work).
- Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently with soap and water.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue. Dispose of the tissue and wash your hands.

“In more than half of our latest cases, there is no one point of exposure so that tells us we are clearly seeing the virus circulating in our communities,” Dr. Bocking says. “We need to stay vigilant, follow the directions and do our part to stop any further spread.”