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LOCAL : NEWS

Health unit tells those feeling unwell to skip getting tested and presume they have COVID-19

Province recommends limiting PCR testing only for symptomatic people in certain occupations such as long-term care homes, congregate settings, health care workers

By **Catherine Whitnall** Reporter

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The local health unit has joined the province in urging people who believe they might have COVID-19 to simply assume they have the virus and take necessary action instead of seeking out a confirmatory test.

“With the current surge in COVID-19 cases, Ontario has reached its maximum PCR (polymerase chain reaction) testing capacity. There are very few open appointments at local assessment centres, and the turnaround time to receiving results of a PCR test is now three to four days,” said Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit medical officer of health Dr. Natalie Bocking.

Most recent data (as of Dec. 30) shows the region with 619 unresolved cases - 231 in Kawartha Lakes, 352 in Northumberland and 36 in Haliburton - including 136 new confirmed cases reported on Dec. 30. However, that number is likely not accurate given the lack of testing.

Speaking on behalf of Ross Memorial Hospital, Tamra Fierheller, executive assistant to CEO and President Kelly Isfan, said the hospital’s assessment centre has been experiencing an extremely high volume of calls from individuals seeking a PCR test based on a positive rapid antigen test result at home, known close contacts to a suspected or confirmed positive case, and from individuals with symptoms who wish to be tested.

“This has caused delays in messages being cleared from our assessment centre phone line and in how quickly appointments can be confirmed. While the assessment centre does its best to book same-day appointments, the high volumes are resulting in some appointments being booked a day or two out,” said Fierheller.

“We continue to ask for patience and understanding as our staff does their best to address the high demand.”

On Thursday (Dec. 30), Ontario’s chief medical officer of health Dr. Kieran Moore said the province is now recommending PCR testing only for symptomatic people in certain occupations such as long-term care homes, congregate settings, health care workers - as well as hospitalized patients - and people from or working in First Nation, Inuit and Metis communities.

Given the limited availability of PCR testing, the health unit asks residents who have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 - even if they are mild - have been exposed to COVID-19 or have tested positive on a Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) to assume it is Omicron and to isolate for the recommended time; five days if fully vaccinated and/or under age 12.

“Stay home and isolate. Only leave home if you need medical care. Notify anyone you had contact within the two days prior to your symptoms starting or receiving a positive test result that they have possibly been exposed to COVID-19,” continues Dr. Bocking, adding the health unit has a letter on its website (www.hkpr.on.ca) that can be provided to high-risk contacts.

“Not everyone who gets COVID-19 will get really sick, but some will, and the goal is to keep as many people out of hospital as possible.”