



15 FEBRUARY 2021

### **Public Health Alert – COVID-19 Variants of Concern**

Dear Chief and Health Director:

### **Public Health Alert – COVID-19 Variants of Concern**

As you are aware, COVID-19 Variants of Concern (VOCs) are circulating within Ontario. We are writing to you today to provide updated information and public health recommendations regarding COVID-19 VOCs.

At least one of these variants, B.1.1.7 (the “UK variant”) is thought to be 30-50% more transmissible than those already established in Canada and there is some evidence that it can cause more severe illness, resulting in more hospitalizations and deaths. This variant can spread very quickly from people who do not know they have it (asymptomatic people) and can cause a rapid increase in cases in a short period of time.

In January 2021, an outbreak of B.1.1.7 in a Barrie, Ontario, long-term care facility saw almost every resident of the facility infected. More recently, this variant was detected during the week of February 8, 2021 in St. John’s, Newfoundland, resulting in a lockdown and closure of workplaces, schools, and non-essential businesses to control the spread of this variant.

Given this evolving situation, we are making the following recommendations:

1. Remain aware of VOC detection in your area/region by visiting your local public health unit website(s).
2. Continue to prepare should a VOC be detected by alerting residents and preparing to support an immediate lockdown and stay-at-home order for the community. A stay-at-home order could be 14 days or longer depending on the variant’s spread in a community.
3. Strongly consider the following public health measures should a VOC be detected in a community and if there is any uncertainty about spread outside of an immediate household:
  - a. Immediate lockdown of community.
  - b. Stay-at-home order in the community.
  - c. Closure of non-essential businesses, workplaces, and schools/childcare facilities.
  - d. Daily communication from Chief and Council to residents updating them on the situation.

These public health measures will help limit the spread of infection to community members and allow time for thorough case and contact management, testing of persons at risk of having been exposed, and determination of the extent of possible spread in the community.

### Social Gatherings

As First Nations communities in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta have experienced, social gatherings have been a major source of transmission of COVID-19. In order to avoid this risk, we are continuing to advise that people not gather in other people’s homes, or in places with people they do not live with. Every gathering can quickly contribute to the spread of the virus and lead to many cases that can overwhelm a community.



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Continue to Follow Public Health Measures

COVID-19 vaccine distribution is underway in Ontario, however, we must take action now to prevent the spread of the virus and keep communities safe.

Please continue to advise your residents to practice public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- DO NOT VISIT OTHER PEOPLE'S HOMES
- Any gatherings/celebrations should only include members of an immediate household
- Wash hands often and practice good hygiene
- Cover your cough or sneeze
- IF YOU HAVE ANY SYMPTOMS get tested immediately and stay away from others as much as possible
- Self-isolate until you have your test results and are notified by your provider about next steps
- Wear a well-fitting 3-ply mask and practice physical distancing of 2-metres when out of your home to get essential supplies, groceries, medications, etc.

This advice is to supplement, not replace, the advice of your local public health authorities.

Thank you for all of your efforts in protecting your communities,

Dr. Maurica Maher  
Regional Public Health Physician  
First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, Ontario Region