

October 18, 2023

Dear Resident,

As you may have seen in the news and on Ottawa Public Health's (OPH) [respiratory illness surveillance dashboard](#), COVID-19 activity has been increasing in our community, alongside other respiratory illnesses like influenza (flu) and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). **Older adults continue to be at higher risk for severe illness and complications from COVID-19** and the risk of fatal outcomes also increases with age. Older adults are also at higher risk of complications or severe illness from the flu.

The surge of COVID-19 activity is expected to continue throughout the fall and into the winter, so I would like to take this opportunity to share some important information with you to help reduce the spread of respiratory illness, prevent severe illness from vaccine-preventable diseases, and let you know what you can do if you experience symptoms of respiratory illness.

You can be more confident to participate in the social activities that we need for our well-being if you use these protections. We are in a better place than in the past with COVID-19 immunity levels higher from vaccination and infection. However, about one third of people over age 60 have never been infected, so maintaining immunity from vaccination remains key for them.

The attached handout, *About Respiratory Illness*, includes information on how to reduce the spread of respiratory illness and what to do if you get sick. The best way to protect yourself is to **stay up to date on your vaccinations**. See the attached PSA, issued on October 10, 2023, for information about influenza (flu) and COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, including eligibility and how to make an appointment. There are several routine immunizations recommended for older adults; speak with your healthcare provider at your next visit to make sure you are up to date with immunizations. If you don't have a healthcare provider, speak with your local pharmacist or call 811 to speak with a registered nurse. More information is also available on our website: [Immunizations for Older Adults - Ottawa Public Health](#)

In addition to staying up to date on vaccination, **the following public health measures can help reduce the spread of respiratory illnesses:**

- Wash your hands (or use hand sanitizer) often and avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands;
- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze;
- Disinfect high-touch surfaces in your home and workplace;
- If you have symptoms of a respiratory illness don't visit loved ones in long-term care, retirement homes or in hospital, as they are at increased risk for severe illness;
- Wear a mask:
  - To protect yourself from viral respiratory illnesses;
  - To protect others at higher risk of severe respiratory illness from getting sick; and
  - When you're recovering from illness.

If you have symptoms of respiratory illness, such as those listed in the attached [Respiratory Illness Handout](#) consider testing yourself using a **Rapid Antigen Test (RAT)** and talking to your healthcare provider or pharmacist about treatment options if you test positive.

- Ottawa residents can access RATs through existing OPH services, like [Neighbourhood Health & Wellness Hubs](#) and [community vaccine clinics](#). I encourage you to have a RAT kit at home in the event you develop symptoms.
- Antivirals (like Paxlovid) are most effective when taken within 5 days of when your symptoms began.
- It is also recommended that you stay home until you are fever-free (without using fever reducing medication) **AND** your symptoms have been improving for 24 hours (48 hours for vomiting/diarrhea).
- If you can't stay home, wear a well-fitting mask and avoid non-essential mask-less activities for 10 days from when your symptoms started.

Thank you for taking the time to read this important information and taking the steps to help protect you and your family against respiratory illnesses. For more information on respiratory illness, including vaccination and treatment, please visit our new webpage:

[OttawaPublicHealth.ca/RespVirus](https://OttawaPublicHealth.ca/RespVirus).

If you have questions about your health, call your primary care provider or Health Connect Ontario at 8-1-1.

Sincerely,



**Vera Etches** MD, MHSc, CCFP, FRCPC  
Medical Officer of Health

**Attached:** updated Respiratory Illness Handout in [EN](#) and [FR](#)

**Read:** Ottawa Public Health's latest news release about vaccine rollout here: [EN](#) and [FR](#)

**Learn more:** [Frequently asked questions about the COVID-19 vaccine](#)

**Other publicly funded vaccines for older adults:** [Immunizations for Older Adults](#)

**Protect your mental health:** [Staying Mentally Healthy During the Winter Months](#)