

All cases of COVID-19 to be tested for UK variant beginning this week: Region

All cases of COVID-19 will be tested for the UK variant this week, according to Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Medical Officer of Health.

As of Monday, February 1, York Region Public Health has confirmed 39 cases of the new variant within the community in 24 households.

The City of Vaughan had the highest number of cases at the start of this week with 12. Case counts were followed in the City of Markham with 11, Richmond Hill with 5, King and Georgina both with 4, and Newmarket with 3.

“Many jurisdictions where the variant has appeared have had explosive and exponential growth,” said Dr. Kurji. “Some of the experts in the U.S. believe that the variant will become the dominant form of COVID-19 virus by the end of March. In York Region, we now have 39 confirmed cases of the variant. We have broken these down into different households and there are 24 households. Out of these 24 households, six of them have had it introduced from abroad, which then means the majority of households have acquired it locally. We do know that the variant is present in virtually all age groups and at least six of the nine municipalities in York Region. In other words, it is circulating amongst our residents and is probably here to grow.”

In his weekly update on Monday, Dr. Kurji praised the Federal and Provincial governments for new measures that came into effect on February 1 on increased screenings at airports. It is hoped, he said, that this will “reduce the cases of COVID-19 coming into the country and, with them cases of the variant.”

“[The variant] goes to higher peaks and it lasts longer, so this translates into it having short incubation periods and being transmissible very fast,” said Dr. Kurji. “The Province, through the Public Health labs will be testing all specimens of COVID-19 beginning this week. So, we expected to be finding more cases of the variant. However, the actions the Provincial and Federal governments have been taking at the borders, both at the airports and hopefully at the land borders, will assist us in reducing the number of COVID-19 cases and, with them, a reduction in the numbers of variants coming into Ontario.”

“In addition to that, we have established a COVID-19 variant unit that aggressively follows up on the cases and identifies the close contacts quickly and ensures that they are self-isolated appropriately. In addition, the Regional Municipality of York, in association with the Province and many other partners, have established a voluntary isolation centre where we are urging some of the new cases of the variants to go and self-isolate.”

“The strategy then is to slow down the spread of the variant to a point where we could potentially be immunizing the whole of the population. Now this is going to be difficult, as you can imagine. However, the good news is the Moderna and the Pfizer vaccines seem to be effective against the variant. The other good piece of news is of the 39 confirmed cases, only 10 are active at this point. It is much too early to say that the variant is not causing any issues in York Region, so time will tell. It is important to follow the stay-at-home order.”

By Tuesday, February 2, Aurora has seen a total of 38 deaths related to the virus.

On Friday, January 29, the Region reported the death of an 87-year-old woman, which took place on January 25. The woman's exposure was related to an institutional outbreak at Southlake Regional Health Centre where she died. An 83-year-old man who succumbed to the virus on January 21 was reported by York Region Public Health on January 30. A case of local transmission, he first experienced symptoms on December 20 before receiving a positive diagnosis on January 5.

A further death, this time related to the ongoing outbreak at Willow Estates Long Term Care, was a 97-year-old woman who died on January 28. Asymptomatic, she tested positive on January 15 and lost her battle on January 28.

Two additional deaths, both related to an ongoing institutional outbreak at Willows Estate, were reported on February 2. The first, 70-year-old male, succumbed on Monday, February 1, after first testing positive on January 10, two days after experiencing his first symptoms. The second, an 82-year-old female, also lost her fight on Monday after testing positive on January 27, again two days after experiencing her first symptoms.

A second institutional outbreak at Kingsway Place Retirement Residence is now closed.

To date, Aurora has seen a total of 861 confirmed cases of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. 775 cases are now marked as recovered and 48 cases remain active. Of the active cases, 32 are related to local transmission or close contact, 11 are related to institutional outbreak, 4 to a workplace cluster, and 1 to travel.

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