



COVID-19 livestream update

Wednesday, April 6, 2022

>> Renée: Good morning, everyone. I'm Renée Francoeur with Cabinet Communications, and the moderator for today's COVID-19 update. We are joined today by Premier Sandy Silver, and virtually by Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Jesse Kancir. Thank you to Mary Thiessen for providing our ASL interpretation, and to Andre Bourcier for providing our French translation. Following the remarks from our speakers, we will go to the media on the phone lines for a round of questions. I'll call you by name and you will each have two questions. Before we begin with our speakers, I'll verify that everyone can hear us. If any reporters are having problems, please email ecoinfo@yukon.ca. I'll now hand it over to Premier Silver.

>> Thank you very much, Renée, and good morning everyone. Thank you very much for joining us. It's--we're broadcasting live from the quad--the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and Ta'an Kwäch'an Council. Thank you to one of our Medical Officers of Health, Dr. Jesse Kancir, for joining us as well, virtually. A familiar face that we have missed here in the Yukon. It's wonderful to have you joining us virtually, as well, my friend. It's been a few weeks since our last COVID-19 update, and that's a sign of the times that we're now in. We are no longer in a state of emergency. As we forge ahead with our response to the pandemic, weekly updates are no longer necessary. This doesn't mean that we won't host them from time to time, like today, and speak directly to Yukoners, to share information in this format. Dr. Kancir will provide an update on the current situation in a moment. What I can say is that we remain in a stable and manageable situation. We are in a good place, thanks to the efforts of Yukoners. Getting vaccinated, practising the Safe Six, following public health measures, and the leadership that has been shown in our communities, by our local businesses, and also our local community organizations. This is a very important week for government employees. As of Monday, April 4th, the vaccination requirement for employment has been lifted for most employees. We are now only requiring that people working in high-risk settings be vaccinated. These settings include long-term care homes and hospitals, residential substance use programs and shelters, residential programs for children and adults, where staff provide care, correctional centres, government-operated community health centres, and government-operated public health clinics. This requirement will continue to apply to employees, to contractors and volunteers working in these settings. We are keeping this requirement in place, so that we can continue to protect the health and safety of vulnerable people accessing services in high-risk settings, along with the staff that serve them. Masks are also still required in a number of settings, including schools and daycares, long-term care homes and health facilities, shelters and group homes, the correctional centre and hospitals. I want to thank all of our employees for



their service. I want to thank you for your patience, and for your understanding, and for helping to keep the most vulnerable Yukoners safe. This week, new national recommendations were provided, regarding second COVID-19 booster shots for vulnerable individuals, including seniors, Elders, and those living in long-term care homes. Our government is planning to roll out these second boosters as soon as possible. Starting on April 12th, second booster shots will be available to individuals who are immune compromised, those who are 70 years of age or older, and those who are living in long-term care or other senior congregate living settings.

Vaccination remains the best form of protection against COVID-19 and, especially, the most severe health outcomes associated with the virus. I encourage all Yukoners to get all doses of COVID-19 vaccinations that are available to you, including your booster shots, when you become available. In Whitehorse, vaccines are still available at the Yukon Convention Centre on Fourth Avenue. Residents in rural communities can call their local health centres to book appointments. And again, you can find any information you need about appointments, or about COVID-19, online at yukon.ca/thisisourshot. Additional appointments are added regularly. As always, you can continue to find the most updated information about COVID on yukon.ca. We continue to monitor the situation very closely, and to continue to work with our partners across the territory, to provide the support needed, now that we have moved past the peak of the Omicron wave and are readjusting to more normal times.

With the longer days and the warmer weather, we're very fortunate to be able to gather with friends and family again. Please continue to be kind and considerate of others. Wash your hands, respect the choice to wear a mask when it's crowded, and stay at home and away from others if you're not feeling well. The Safe Six remains extremely important, and we all have a role to play in reducing the spread of COVID-19. So, with that, stay positive, stay kind, be excellent to each other, continue to hold each other up. And with that, I'm going to hand it over to Dr. Kancir. Jesse?

>> Thank you, Premier Silver, and good morning everyone. After spending much of last year working as a public health doctor for the Yukon, I can say it's really nice to be back, and to be supporting the territory and the team, as a Medical Officer of Health, as Dr. Elliott has taken a well-deserved vacation. I want to start off by giving an update on the current COVID-19 situation in the Yukon. Overall, we're seeing lots of COVID-19 activity across the territory. This comes in both lab-confirmed PCR tests, and also through anecdotal evidence from at-home rapid tests. We've seen our percent positivity rate increase over the last couple of weeks. Right now, it's running on a seven day average of about 40.3%. That's high, and likely due both to a widespread community transmission, but also because of low test volumes. And as we're seeing at-home rapid tests being used more across the territory, more of our PCR are confirmatory tests, which means this will impact our percent positivity. We're also seeing outbreaks in territory. Yesterday afternoon, an outbreak was declared at Copper Ridge Place,



after confirming positive cases of COVID-19 that we believed were linked. Once the first case was identified, our teams rapidly implemented a number of precautionary measures in the affected houses. Routine outbreak management procedures are in place, including screening and testing protocols. Now, I know that hearing about increasing cases, our test positivity rates, and outbreaks can be concerning. Though, realistically, we can expect that the level of COVID-19 is going to be high in territory for a number of weeks to come, due to Omicron. Our systems are ready, and we are adapting to living with COVID-19 for months and years to come. All this may be leaving some of you wondering, "what exactly-- where exactly are we right now, with the stages the pandemic? Are we in a sixth wave? Is this what living with COVID feels like? Is it approaching an end?" And the reality is, it's too far to say exactly where we are. On this topic, though, Canada's chief medical officers of health issued a statement yesterday, and I wanted to share that. They said quote, "after two years of living through the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all looking towards the months ahead with optimism. We are in a stronger position than ever before, largely thanks to the collective actions of people living in Canada to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Although we move forward with hope and resilience, the pandemic is not over, and the SARS-CoV-2 virus continues to circulate and evolve. Several jurisdictions are experiencing an increase in cases, as we transition to a more sustainable approach to managing COVID-19 by easing public health measures. Canada's chief medical officers of health are closely monitoring, and responding to signals of increased transmission, while preparing for additional waves and new variants." And that's the end of the quote. And so, to answer the question of where we are right now, just like the council at CMOH has said, we're in a place where there are reasons for hope and for continued action. And, in regards to continued action, I know we're all tired of talking about COVID, and experiencing the uncertainty that it brings. The reality is that the best way to prevent more transmissible or dangerous variants from emerging is to stop unconstrained spread. And to do that, vaccinations are the main or most important tool. Making sure your vaccinations are up to date is the most important step each of us can take to help. And, on our part in public health, we will continue to monitor scientific evidence and provide expert advice through recommendations that balance the needs of Yukoners, while protecting our most vulnerable citizens. Speaking on vaccinations, the National Advisory Council on Immunization, also known as NACI, released initial guidance on the use of second COVID-19 boosters in Canada. NACI recommends that some populations at higher risk for severe disease should be prioritized for second booster doses. In reviewing their recommendations in a Yukon context, we will recommend providing a second dose to the following groups. First, people who are 70 years of age or older. Second, people are immunocompromised. And third, people living in long-term care or other senior congregate living settings. As the Premier mentioned, we expect to have appointments available starting April 12th, and soon be able to vaccinate this cohort, and are hoping to do so by mid-May. Second boosters for residents in long-term care homes are expected to begin in early May, as



well. NACI will continue to assess their recommendations, and we expect further recommendations around boosters for other groups in the coming weeks.

I also want to touch briefly on the ongoing need for personal risk assessments, given the high level of COVID-19 infections that are in the territory. Overall, COVID-19 will generally present with mild symptoms in those whose vaccines are up to date, but it does vary from person to person. It can be more severe for those who have a higher risk for severe disease, such as those with diabetes, those with obesity, those who are immunocompromised, and those who might have chronic respiratory or kidney disease. If you are experiencing severe difficulty breathing, severe chest pain, feelings of confusion, or loss of consciousness, don't hesitate. Please call 911, or go to the emergency department for an assessment. Because COVID-19 can be grave, we're also encouraging Yukoners to use their COVID sense, and assess the risk before attending a gathering. There are five factors that can help you assess your risk. Vaccination status, people, space, time, and place. And to learn more about, and view the risk assessment tool that we're recommending to the Yukon, visit yukon.ca/assess-your-risk. I also want to take a few moments and talk about an update on Paxlovid here in the Yukon. Earlier this year, Health Canada authorized the combination of two antiviral drugs to treat adults with mild to moderate COVID-19, who are at high risk of progressing to serious disease, including hospitalization or death. We're pleased to advise that the program has now launched in the Yukon. Paxlovid will be available by prescription in pharmacies in Whitehorse, and has been shipped to primary care health centres and hospitals in rural communities. This medication will be offered to people who are most at risk of severe outcomes. Paxlovid will be prescribed by healthcare providers, and eligible patients includes those who have mild symptoms, and are within five days of their symptom onset, and meet a set of specific risk factors, as determined by the healthcare practitioner. Yukoners should talk to their healthcare provider or community health centre for more information. This is an exciting step, for Canada and for the Yukon, but it's important to remind everybody that it's not a replacement for a vaccination. Still, keeping your vaccines up to date is the best way to protect yourself, your family and friends, our seniors, our Elders, and little ones, and as well as our communities across the territory. In closing, I'd like to remind everyone that COVID-19 is still spreading in the Yukon, and there is still a risk of infection. Everyone, you, me, we all have a role to play in reducing the spread of disease and keeping our community healthy. Our best personal and collective protection against COVID-19, is when we all stay up to date on our vaccinations. Right now, vaccinations and appointments are available on yukon.ca. [Speaking Indigenous Language] Thank you. Merci.

>> Renée: Thank you, Dr. Kancir, and thank you, Premier Silver. A reminder to reporters, please identify which speaker you would like to answer your question before you start. And, please, also remember to mute and unmute yourselves. We'll first go to Luke from CKRW.



>> Reporter: Thank you. This first question would be for Dr. Kancir. I'm just looking at some of the stats right now, and Yukon only has about a 53% uptake of the third dose, or a booster shot, of the eligible population. Just wondering if you could, maybe, reiterate a little bit more the importance for that general population to get the third shot, as we start rolling out fourth doses for vulnerable populations?

>> Yeah, great question. Thank you for it. You know, the recommendations for booster doses come because we've seen that, over time, there is a waning immunity with our vaccine doses. And so, just having one, just having two provides a degree of protection, but having three protects-- offers even more. And so, the recommendations for a booster, really, is because we know that it is offering more protection against infections in general, against hospitalizations, and against death. And so, it really is based in protection for the individual and for the communities.

>> Renée: Thank you. Luke, do you have a second question? [End 0-20]

>> I do. This is also for Dr. Kancir. Do you see these booster doses, or maybe just a smaller COVID-19 vaccine, being, sort of, moving towards an annual thing like a flu shot? Maybe you know, people end up getting a COVID booster and a flu shot all at the same time in the future, just as we progress through different stages of this pandemic?

Again, a great question. I'm-- you know what, I don't know where the state of vaccines will go in the next year. I do know that this is something that the body that gives advice on vaccines, NACI, is following this very closely. And in territory we have followed their direction on boosters and vaccines, and will continue to follow the evidence. And as NACI comes up with recommendations around further boosters, we'll be considering that and making sure that that information is provided, and recommendations to Yukoners as well.

>> Thank you. We'll now move to Mike, at CBC.

>> Reporter: Yeah, hello. This question is probably for Premier Sandy Silver. With this high rate of COVID in the Yukon, I'm just wondering if you are thinking about bringing back mask mandates in interior spaces.

>> Thanks for the question, Mike. As I said in my opening comments, there is still requirements for masks in certain settings, and so we're monitoring the situation right now. We hope to not have to go to a situation where we increase the level of protection that we need, writ large. We have seen in the past with some gatherings, some increasing cases in certain areas, but so far, we haven't heard a recommendation from the chief medical officer of health to re-establish or to change our current approach when it comes to masking. Myself personally, I haven't changed any of my behaviors. I'm still wearing a mask when I'm in social settings, when I'm walking into



a restaurant or a bar, or-- you know, or even grocery shopping, and in-- especially in those situations where I can't maintain a distance of one caribou.

>> Thank you. Mike, do you have a second question?

>> Reporter: Yeah I do, and again, for Premier Sandy Silver. We've been-- [Clears throat] Excuse me. We haven't had a chief medical officer of health, you know, being hired. I'm just wondering where the Yukon Government is at in that process, and when can we expect a permanent position for that?

>> Yeah, I'm not involved in the hiring process. I'm very glad to see Dr. Kancir here, helping us out. You know, his knowledge of the North has been fantastic and very much appreciated. Not even to mention his rapport when it comes to the conversations that we have with our leaders in the communities. I've heard from many folks on those calls, mentioning his professionalism and approachability. These are complex conversations, for sure, and to get those medical terms down to something that, you know, leaders like myself and others can understand and be able to relate to the community is extremely important. And so we've had that support with André Corriveau as well, and as we-- I know, you know, doctor-- our current acting medical officer is taking some much needed rest and vacation, but as soon as we have an update on the tendering process, we'll definitely make that available to you, Mike.

>> Thank you. We'll now move to Michelle, at CBC.

>> Reporter: Thank you this is a question for Dr. Kacir. You mentioned that there's lots of COVID-19 activity in the territory, and mentioned that a lot of it-- well, some of it, the information that you're screening from had to do with anecdotal evidence, in addition to the stats that were found. So I'm wondering if you can elaborate a little bit on the sources of information in the anecdotal activity that you were mentioning?

>> Yeah, thanks for the question. So the comments on there being a high number of cases is, again, based on-- we mentioned the PCR cases that were happening, so as of yesterday, we had, I think, 77 cases that were currently active in territory, so 77 cases that we knew of. But are certainly hearing more from our neighbours, from our family members, from our workplaces, of people who are testing positive on at home test. And are not going for confirmatory tests, and may not be qualifying for it, but are definitely staying home because they have a positive test. That's something similar to what we've seen in other jurisdictions as well. We know that we don't have, at least, a PCR level, or a lab confirmation of every single case across Canada right now, which is what we'd expect with this stage of the pandemic. But certainly, I think through what people are reporting, combined again, with those 77 that we know of right now, we know that this is high for the territory, and that means that COVID-19 is quite active right now in our communities.



>> Thank you. Michelle, do you have a second question?

>> Reporter: Yes, I do, thanks. So, you're saying that there's lots of activity, so in the past, according to the information on the dashboard, the number of daily new cases has gone down this week from last week. So given what you've been saying, are you-- what can you tell me about what you're expecting in the future, the kinds of trends that you're expecting in the number of cases and hospitalization?

>> In terms of hospitalizations, you know, I will say that it's something that, in terms of a trend line, I don't have a great sense of where that is going to go. I will say that based on what we know about Omicron in other jurisdictions, and based all we know about BA2, so the subset of COVID that we're dealing with right now in territory, it's quite infectious, right? And so we've seen across Canada, currently, in the past few weeks, in the past month, a significant number of infections. And so it is, you know, something that we should we should expect, and that we're prepared to deal with, and-- sorry, and what that is, is a high level of COVID-19 infections. Now, that hasn't coupled itself with the same increase in hospitalizations or deaths. And so, for the territory for the next few weeks, the expectation would be, and again, we've seen this play out in other areas where this variant has been spreading, is more people to be getting ill, but not necessarily to be hospitalized, or to die from the variant. We certainly know that those who are protected, as well, from vaccination, are going to see even more of that decoupling between getting sick and then having adverse outcomes. And that's one of the reasons why we are promoting vaccinations so much right now. Because we are expecting cases to continue, we are expecting illness to be in territory-- and I would say over the next month for sure, is that it's not too late to get vaccinated, and that can help us further separate getting an infection from the outcomes that we are quite concerned about.

>> Thank you. We'll now move to Gabrielle, at Yukon news.

>> Reporter: Hi! It's actually Stephanie at the Yukon news, and wondering when we might expect to see second boosters available to the general public?

I can go with that, I guess. So the second booster shot will be available for those that are over 70, and long and residents of long-term care homes, and that is starting next week, as we mentioned, April the 12th. We anticipate national recommendations will be coming soon to roll out second booster shots for other age groups, and we will be preparing to roll out through our clinics right away once we get that from NACI. And getting vaccinations, again, I know that we both-- Jessie and I both sound like broken records, but extremely important. The best form of protection against COVID-19, especially for not seeing the most severe impacts to our health. So encouraging everybody. We mentioned that there are still folks that need to get a second



booster, and we'll be preparing for the national recommendations and be prepared at that point to roll up more information about the general population and that second booster.

>> Thank you, and apologies, Stephanie. Do you have a second question?

>> Reporter: I don't thank you.

>> Thank you. We'll now move to Tim, at the Whitehorse Star.

>> Reporter: Thank you very much. My first question could go to either the Premier or the doctor. As one of only two jurisdictions in Canada that isn't tracking for COVID via wastewater samples, just wondering if there's any point in changing that?

>> We haven't-- I haven't heard of any plans of changing that, Tim. I'm not sure if Dr. Kacir can maybe help us as far as that recommendation, but, yeah, right now we are focusing in on strain on our healthcare systems, and even though, you know, with a change in the testing parameters that we saw over the holidays and into January, and people were focusing in on test positivity rates, we still have a really fantastic system here in Yukon to be able to trace outbreaks and how the virus moves through our communities. I would say as well, you know, we know that the Northwest Territories has used this successfully, the wastewater testing, but we believe that so far through the pandemic we haven't had to rely on that statistic, to be able to trace and to curb the spread of the virus in Yukon.

>> Maybe I'll just comment that as well, and said that, you know, wastewater surveillance isn't something that the Yukon has relied on throughout the course of the pandemic. It is only one way doing infectious disease surveillance. I think that the tools that the territory have used have helped it respond to risks appropriately. So I am not aware of any plans to change that, and confident in how surveillance has happened so far in territory.

>> Thank you. Tim, do you have a second question?

>> Reporter: I do. And this one's probably more for the doctor than the Premier, but he can weigh in, if you like. For the past several weeks, in fact, since the COVID briefings have been irregular, I've been getting a series of somewhat angry phone calls, people asking why the effects of natural immunity aren't being discussed? Can either one of you touch on that subject?

>> Sure, I'm happy to comment on it. Thanks for the question, Tim. The-- one of the reasons why we've been so confident with recommending immunization through vaccinations is that we have very good evidence of what we can consistently expect from vaccinations. Having something like a natural infection can provide a degree of immunity, there's no doubt about that. But the exact degree to which it is protecting people is variable. Not everyone is going to have the same exposure, not always going to have the same amount of a viral load, and



because of that, how much protection you're getting from an infection is unknown. And it could actually be unsafe to rely on it. So, one thing we do know, after having started the vaccinations, after having been quite sure of what we get from vaccinations, we recommend that over natural immunity. And there's just too much uncertainty, and because of the degree to which we're concerned about COVID-19, we've seen the effect it has on people who aren't vaccinated, the recommendation has really begin to focus on something that we have certainty about, that we know is safe, and we know that can protect people.

>> Thank you. We'll now move to Vincent at Radio Canada.

[Speaking French]

>> Voice of interpreter: So, the positivity rate is based on people that are being tested. Can we imagine that in the future we can see the positivity rate based on the population as a whole, as we go along?

>> I can speak about past practices, but I will leave the forecasting in the current situation to Dr. Kancir, as far as what the chief medical officers, and the national advisory councils are telling us. Our approach to testing has been modelled based upon the current need, whether it be for Delta or for Omicron, and it has changed. It has also changed because of the efficacy of some of these rapid tests, and the considerable advances in technology that we've seen over the last two years. So, again, even though, you know, there are some people that are concerned that with more rapid testing, and our case positivity rate going up, because, really, the people that are coming into the government facilities to be tested, there's probably a greater chance that they have COVID. That's why they're coming our way. We still believe that the testing that we've been doing for the last two years has been very effective in, again, being able to, in Yukon a context, identify and curb the spread of the virus, regardless of which of those variants was the variant of the day. Dr. Kancir, I don't know if you have anything as far as where we may be heading with testing?

>> That's-- [Speaking French]

I think I understood it properly, but if I didn't, feel free to correct me, and my apologies. And I think what you're asking is, based on our test currently really being preserved for a priority population, are we expecting to see a change towards it including more of the broader population in the future? I'm not sure if that's what your question was, but if that's what it was, I would say that I wouldn't be expecting that. Right? And we would think that our testing would actually mirror other diseases that are endemic, right? And so we think of something like a flu virus, right? Where we deal consistently with flu seasons, every year. And we do perform tests, but it usually is done for someone who has to be hospitalized, to know what exactly we might be dealing with, to make sure that we're actually treating them properly if they end up in



hospital. But we aren't doing widespread testing for everybody in the community, and that would be the direction that we would expect COVID-19 to go in as well. And so, again, if the question was about whether we expect changes to broaden testing as we head into the future, I would say no, and that our model currently of priority populations is the model for similar infectious diseases, and one that we would expect to remain here in territory.

>> Thank you. Vincent, do you have a second question?

[Speaking French]

>> Thank you very much. That concludes our COVID-19 update for today. Thank you again to Dr. Kancir, and to Premier Silver, the media, and everyone who tuned in to watch live over Facebook. Stay kind, stay positive, and have a wonderful Wednesday everyone.