

COVID-19 Facebook live update: December 8, 2021

>> Good morning to you all. I am Renée Francoeur with Cabinet Communications, and I'll be your moderator for today's COVID 19 update.

We are joined by the Minister of Health and Social Services Tracy-Anne McPhee, and the acting Chief Medical Officer of Health Catherine Elliott.

Close captioning is provided by National Closed Captioning.

Thank you to Mary Tiessen 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 present in the room, and then on to the phone lines for questions.

I'll call you by name, and you will each have two questions.

Before we begin with our speakers, I like to verify that everyone can hear us. If any reporters are having problems, please e-mail ecoinfo@yukon.ca.

I will now hand it over to the Minister of Health and Social Services.

>> Thanks very much Renée.

Good morning, everyone and thank you for joining us today.

It's great to be here with Dr Elliott on the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Taa'an Kwächän Council

Thank you to everyone for listening and for staying up to date on the current COVID-19 situation in the territory.

As some of you may be aware, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization has provided new recommendations regarding vaccines and booster shots.

Starting today, people in Whitehorse aged 18 and older will be able to book appointments to get their booster shots at the Whitehorse Vaccine Clinic.

In communities, some booster clinics are open for people aged 18 and older, and more clinics will be added in the coming weeks.

All Yukoners aged 18 and over who are eligible to get a booster, meaning it has been at least six months since their second shot, should be able to receive one before the end of January.

We are truly in a fortunate position to begin offering boosters for all adults.

Our territory was among the first prioritized during the early stages of the COVID 19 vaccine rollout here in Canada.

Many Yukoners had their second shot in the spring, before much of the rest of Canada even had access to their first shot.

Vaccination remains our best protection and I strongly urge all eligible Yukoners to get vaccinated and to get a booster shot once you are eligible.

You can find clinic information and book your shot online at yukon.ca/this-is-our-shot. Or you can also call the COVID 19 Infoline for information on clinic dates and times. That number is 1-877-374-0425.

Walk-ins will be accommodated, when possible, but please note they are not guaranteed.

As our vaccine rollout continues, our priority at this time is for children to get their first doses.

Clinics for our little Yukoners aged five to 11 opened just this week, and it was wonderful to see so much interest.

This week's appointment slots booked up very quickly.

Thank you to everyone who made an appointment for their child.

Next week, which is December 13th to the 17th, based on demand the Whitehorse Vaccine Clinic will solely be offering appointments for children aged five to 11.

No appointments for adults will be offered during that time.

This is so that we can ensure that we are immunizing as many children as possible.

Our goal is to ensure that all children can receive their first dose before Christmas.

I want to give a big shout out to all the immunizers who have gone above and beyond for Team Yukon.

Right from the onset of the vaccine rollout, they have been there. Ready to pivot swiftly, remaining flexible in the face of new roles, complex questions, changing timelines and many other unprecedented challenges.

And here they are, still going strong.

Ready to inoculate our young Yukoners and administer another round of boosters.

Their dedication is admirable.

Thank you for caring about others.

Thank you for your drive to protect us all and thank you for being our helpful heroes.

This holiday season, I hope we all take a page from your books and pass on the outstanding level of goodwill.

Last week the new vaccine requirements for employment came into force here in the territory.

I wanted to provide an update on the number of staff impacted by this public health measure.

As of yesterday, 94.2 percent of employees have attested to having received their first dose.

Of those who have not attested, 1.8 percent are full-time employees, that's 107 individuals.

The majority of those who have not yet attested are casual or on-call employees accounting for 3.3 percent of our workforce.

The numbers change everyday as more attestations continue to come in and employees choose to get vaccinated.

Thank you to everyone who has helped to keep our workplaces safe.

We appreciate you paving the way, along with other public servants and healthcare workers across the country. In this new world, in which we've learned to safely live with COVID 19.

Before I pass it to Dr Elliott to provide an overview of the territory's scene and situation, I just wanted to acknowledge that there have been a steady downward trend in active cases over the last few weeks.

The public health measures be introduced last month have been effective.

I want to thank all the Yukoners who have done their part to adjust to the new public health measures and limit the transmission.

We are grateful for all of your efforts and diligence.

As the premier has said, we are all in this together and we will get through this together.

Please take care of yourselves and be kind.

Thank you.

>> Thank you, Minister McPhee.

And good morning, everyone. Bonjour.

I will begin with the case epidemiology.

As Minister McPhee pointed out, we continue to see a downward trend in cases. There have been a total of 1,561 cases and 1,505 people have recovered from COVID 19.

14 Yukoners have died since the beginning of this pandemic of COVID 19.

As of this morning, we have 44 active cases in Yukon and over the last week we've had an average of eight new cases a day.

This is a manageable level. These numbers represent a continued stabilization in case counts.

And the continued decrease in new infections everyday is promising.

The circuit breaker had the effect that was intended, and holding current measures now is intended to help us all have a safe holiday season.

There is now a new twist in the road.

As you know, On November 26th the World Health Organization designated the variant B11529 as a variant of concern called omicron.

The WHO's decision was based on the evidence that omicron has several mutations that have an impact on how it behaves. For example, how easily it spreads.

Europe has hundreds of cases in over 25 countries, and there are cases on nearly every continent.

Most of the cases in Canada are among travellers and their close contacts. In Canada we are seeing omicron spreading, with an increasing number of provinces and territories having cases.

Last week I mentioned it was only a matter of time before it arrives in Yukon.

So, it's not surprising that this week I'm reporting that there are two confirmed cases of omicron here.

We anticipated this, we were prepared, and this has been very well managed by the excellent staff at Yukon Communicable Disease Control who have been with us since the beginning and continue diligently to take care of our cases as they continue to occur.

The infected individuals in this situation are all taking the appropriate precautions to contain their disease and to help protect the community.

This is exactly what any of us would do, and what so many of us have done to protect ourselves from the spread of COVID 19.

It might seem like a funny thing to say, something I might say to my children, or you might say to a kindergarten class, but really the name of the game to protect ourselves from COVID is to keep our germs to ourselves.

This is what these two individuals are doing, and as community members, as neighbours, as friends, they have done the right thing to protect us and for that I'm very grateful.

I know you all will join me in wishing them a full and speedy recovery and thank them for their efforts to protect us.

People might be wondering a little-- wanting to know a little bit more about omicron.

The evidence is, its early days, and we will learn more as the science develops. And at this point, the evidence suggests that omicron may be more transmissible than the delta variant.

Over time it may well replace delta in Canada as it has done in South Africa. For now, delta by far remains the dominant variant in Canada.

The vaccine effectiveness against omicron is not known at this time, and there's much speculation.

We expect the vaccine effectiveness will hold, and particularly against severe illness and death.

Regardless of what speculation is out there, we must follow the science on this one.

This does not change the fact that the vaccines are critical to reduce severe illness and death, and they are our best shot.

Our vaccines are highly effective against delta in preventing severe illness and death, and the arrival of the new variant in Yukon is a reminder of how important it is for all of us to get our vaccine. For our children to do so, and to get boosters when we're eligible.

We must also continue to practice the safe six plus one to do our part in preventing the spread of COVID 19.

I'm heartened as I go out and about, seeing people wearing their masks, keeping distance, being careful, and washing their hands, and taking care of one another.

We all know that vaccination is how we're going to beat COVID 19.

I want to go through the numbers a bit and say thank you to all those people who have gotten vaccinated.

91 percent of Yukoners aged 18 and older have now had their first shot.

87 percent of adult Yukoners have had their second shot.

For those 12 to 17, 84 percent of have their first shot and 78 percent have had their second.

Children five to ten are starting to receive their first shots and appointments are booking up quickly.

It's encouraging to see so many young, sorry. It's encouraging to see so many young Yukoners join their parents and caregivers in getting vaccinated, because it's getting those children vaccinated that will help us be even more protected as a society.

This is one of the high priority areas right now for vaccination.

The vaccinated population in the Yukon is growing among all age groups.

Last week I was asked a question.

Among Yukoners who have contracted COVID 19, how many are vaccinated?

I've been saying for several weeks, that about half of the cases now we're seeing among Yukoners-- are among Yukoners who are vaccinated for COVID 19.

This is true, and I'd like to take the opportunity to tell you more about this.

at this point, we have nearly 80 percent of the entire population, all age groups in Yukon, fully vaccinated.

When you have such a large proportion of the population vaccinated, and they're showing the same number of infections as the much smaller proportion that are not vaccinated, you can see the vaccine is working.

As we go into more severe outcomes such as hospitalizations, we see this difference get even broader.

So, it means that the more people that get vaccinated, the number of cases of COVID will go down.

And because people who are unvaccinated are significantly more-- sorry, people who were unvaccinated are significantly more likely to contract COVID and to get severe disease.

Severe sickness and death are significantly more likely among people who contract COVID 19 and are unvaccinated. This is why we see among unvaccinated people, young healthy adults who do get quite ill, um, become hospitalized and end up in ICU and some have even died across Canada.

This is preventable by getting vaccinated.

So you can see that while we're seeing equal numbers of people-- of cases among vaccinated and unvaccinated people, the unvaccinated people are contracting COVID 19 at a significantly greater rate. And the risk to their health for severe illness, hospitalization and death is greater.

I can't say it enough, getting vaccinated is the most important step that any of us can take to protect ourselves and to protect the people in our community.

To help with this, as Minister McPhee has just mentioned, based on my recommendation we'll be offering booster shots to people aged 18 and over beginning today.

Our priority will remain the first shots for children age five to 11 for this month. So, there will be limited booster appointments available in the short term, and we hope to get everyone over the age of 18 the opportunity to be-- have their booster early into the new year.

People aged 18 to 29 will be offered the Pfizer (Comirnaty) for their booster shots.

This is due to an extremely rare association with heart inflammation among young adults, mainly males, associated more frequently with the Moderna (SpikeVax) vaccine.

Adults age 30 and older will continue to be offered Moderna (SpikeVax) for their booster shot.

Please also be aware that the Whitehorse Vaccine Clinic will be closed December 24th through 28th and December 31st through January 3rd.

So please do book your appointment online at yukon.ca/thisisourshot. Book as soon as you can to improve your chances of getting your appointment before the end of the year.

Residents and communities outside of Whitehorse can call their health centre.

Again, as Minister McPhee mentioned, walk-ins will be accommodated, but it's-- it will be accommodated when possible and not guaranteed.

As you can see, we are expanding this COVID 19 vaccine campaign significantly and rapidly, and it's putting tremendous demand on the vaccination system. Particularly the front-line nurses. I urge everyone to be patient, please be kind, and be thankful as we move together through this time.

Yes, it's important we all get vaccinated as quickly as possible, and important we maintain the qualities that make the Yukon the home and place that we all love to live.

The warmth of our community, the supportive family, friends and neighbours, the appreciation we have for all the services we have here, for the wilderness, for nature, and for the wonderful place in which we live.

Most of us are eager to get vaccinated and keep ourselves and our loved ones in our community safe. And let's continue to do this with respect and kindness, and with thanks.

[Speaking Indigenous language]

Thank you. Merci.

>> Thank you, Dr Elliott, thank you Minister McPhee. We will now move on to the question-and-answer session with media.

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 will first go to the reporters in the room, and we'll start with Luke at CKRW.

>> Thank you, I do have one question for Dr Elliott.

I've had a couple parents, uh, asking if there should be a bit of spacing out between-- if their child has gotten COVID, and when they should get their first dose for their child. Is there a certain waiting time? Or are they okay to just go get their vaccine right away?

>> There's-- the question is about whether there's a waiting time if the child has been infected with COVID, for having their first shot. No, there is no waiting time between those two.

>> That's the only question I have, thank you.

>> Thank you.

>> Thank you, Luke. We'll now move to Anna with CBC.

>> Hi, thank you. My question is for Dr Elliott. So, you announced today that there will be booster shots available for those between the ages of 18 and 49, but the priority is still on children. So just how many appointments are being made available in the next few weeks? Thank you.

>> Uh, I'm not aware of the exact number of appointments for boosters in the next coming weeks. Next week we are focusing solely on children in Whitehorse, and this is because as a priority in terms of how best to protect the entire population, having children get their first shot is a higher priority than having an adult get their third shot. In terms of looking at the overall ability of COVID to spread in the community.

Our aim is to have all adults have opportunity to get their booster shot by early in the new year.

>> Thank you. I do have another question, this one is also for Dr Elliott. So, you mentioned that there's the arrival of omicron here in Yukon and in other jurisdictions, the provincial governments have said, you know, hold back on your plans for the holidays, don't meet up with people. So on and so forth.

What are your recommendations for Yukoners going into the holiday season?

>> So as we enter the holiday season, we have moderate levels of COVID activity already in the territory with the delta variant, and we have the arrival of omicron amongst two individuals.

Um, the omicron here is contained.

Nonetheless, being prudent and cautious over the holiday is a wise move. We have measures in place already, limiting indoor gatherings and, um-- and we're also really emphasizing that people should take account of their own vulnerabilities and risks. So people who are older, people with chronic disease, people who are pregnant. So, at risk of more severe outcomes with COVID 19 are people who should be more cautious, limit their group sizes, limit their numbers, etcetera.

In terms of specific holiday guidance, we'll have more information next week on that.

Thank you.

>> Thank you. We'll move to the phone lines, and we'll start with Haley at Yukon News.

>> Thank you. My first question would probably be for Dr Elliott. Um, I'm wondering what availability is in the territory for the Janssen vaccine?

I know in British Columbia they are offering that vaccine in, you know, limited doses to people who have been laid off because they are unvaccinated.

I'm wondering if a similar arrangement will be made in the Yukon, and if you have a timeline for that?

>> We have had about a hundred doses of Janssen vaccine available here in Yukon, um, and a number of people have taken advantage of that opportunity. Janssen is not an mRNA vaccine, it is not as effective as the mRNA vaccines. However, for some people, they find that's a more comfortable option and we have been able to offer that here.

Um, I'm not actually aware of how many doses, if any, are remaining in territory. And we are matching what we can obtain, in terms of the government allocation-- the nation-- federal government allocation to the request we have here.

We were able to meet the list of people who had requested Janssen with the current allocation.

>> Thank you, do you have a second question Haley?

>> I do, yeah. I'm wondering, you know, it-- particularly the omicron variation, but also other new cases of COVID 19, I know when community transmission was high, contact tracing kind of ceased, you know, everywhere was an opportunity to get COVID 19. I'm wondering if contact tracing has resumed now?

>> So, cases have stabilized at a new, higher level than what we'd had, for example, in the summer. So we are seeing on average, over the course of a week, we're seeing about eight new cases a day.

So, what this means is that we do continue to have community transmission here in Whitehorse.

It's not at the level that we were seeing before, but it continues to exist, and people should continue to follow the safe six and follow guidance where they are.

We are continuing to do contact tracing in high-risk settings, so those settings where people who are most vulnerable are exposed. And we are asking people to reach out to their contacts with guidance-- based on guidance on our website for people who are not in high-risk settings. And we will continue to do that. Thank you.

One thing-- um, I just do want to add that for the situation with people who-- if we see more people, which we likely will, with COVID 19 of the omicron variant here, we are taking a more containment approach to that group in order to slow the spread of omicron into our-- into the territory.

So the measures they will be asked to undertake are-- will be more cautious than we would take otherwise for the delta variant.

We know eventually that-- or we expect, we never know with COVID, but we expect that omicron could become a dominant variant here and it's just about slowing that process at this time. Thanks.

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

>> Thank you, good morning. My first question is probably more for Dr Elliott. You mentioned that the circuit breaker effect of the state of emergency seems to be working and it's going to persist for a while.

When do you plan on seeing the state of emergency, or recommending that it end? Sometime after new year's?

>> So, the early to mid November, when we announced the circuit breaker measures, we know it's very stringent measures. And we held those measures until they were lifted last week, uh, many of the most stringent measures were lifted last week.

At this point we continue to have limits on group size, proof of vaccination, the vaccine mandates, and a couple mandatory masking in public spaces, um, etcetera. And we expect to continue this through the holiday season in order to have a safe holiday season.

We will reassess in January, we'll know more about the omicron variant at that time, and we'll also have a better sense of the impact of holidays. The amount of mixing, what people do over the holidays, the amount of mixing with people both from other places, you know, we all like to travel, visit our family, etcetera, or have family come here.

The impact of that will be borne out in early January, and we will be able to assess what measures we need to continue to use in the new year.

Thank you.

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

>> I do, again this would be for Dr Elliott. Just wondering if you can give us any more information on where these two omicron cases are located? And what more stringent containment methods are being used? Or recommended?

>> Thank you for the question. Um, so if we think back to when we first had COVID 19 coming into Yukon, I can remember the early days and the first cases. And there was a lot of concern about where people were, and what were we doing to protect the population, etcetera. Um, you know, now we have a new variant, and we see some of the same patterns.

The way-- you might have noticed, for example, the federal government has put in travel restrictions for certain countries, increased testing, etcetera. What-- the way we're working with omicron is that the-- we're tailoring the duration of the isolation period, and how the care with which we manage those household contacts much more stringently. So, for example, household contacts at this point are being asked to isolate with those cases until we learn more about the variant.

This is a precautionary step to ensure-- to prevent the spread into the community.

So, this is the type of thing that we're looking at.

These people are in Yukon, they're Yukoners. That's what I have to say about where they are. Thanks.

>> Thank you. We'll now move to Hina with the Canadian Press.

>> Hi, this is for Dr Elliott.

I'm just wondering if you can describe the symptoms of the two people, and are they vaccinated, and what is their age? The two people who have been identified with the omicron variant.

>> Yeah, thanks for the question. So, it's-- one of the really important things that we do in Public Health is we protect people's privacy. And this is really helped people trust to come forward. You know, should they think they might have been exposed to any infectious disease, whether it's a COVID 19 variant or another type of infectious disease.

And we are grateful for people who come forward and those people who do the right thing. And for those reasons, we don't disclose a whole bunch of confidential information.

What I can say is that in general, these people are recovering at home, and we wish them a safe recovery. So they do not have severe illness, and across-- internationally at this point, the majority of cases of people with omicron have mild illness. As well-- um, and as we learn more, I be able to-- about how-- about this disease, this variant, I'll be able to share that with you. Thank you.

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

>> Yeah, uh-- I mean, to follow up on the first one, I'm not asking for private information, I'm just asking for general symptoms, and their age group, and whether they are vaccinated.

Also, do you think the infections in Yukon would be higher if there was more testing and more contact tracing?

>> Thanks for that. One of the things that-- one of the questions that many people have, is if we have more testing, would we detect more people? And there's a couple ways we figure this out.

One of the really key things is our percent positivity. So, we watch that percent of people who have gotten tested who are positive, and I'm happy to say that we've seen that percent positivity go down as well as the case counts go down.

So that's a very good sign.

So, our testing rates are at a moderate level at this point, and our percent positivity is dropping-- I actually don't have the exact number, but it's gone down below ten.

And we are continuing to follow this, and the trend is downwards which is exactly what we want to see. Yeah, thanks.

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

[Speaking French]

>> So, Dr Elliott, could you please repeat in French more concerning these two cases of omicron that we have right now, what measures are in place? And what do you see, or what is going to be recommended, to make sure the spread is contained for the omicron virus?

[Speaking French]

[Speaking French]

>> Thank you. Do you have a second question, Claudienne?

[Speaking French]

>> So, Dr Elliott, Yukoners will be worried about the arrival of the omicron variant. So, what would be your counsel, or what do you have to tell them in facing this new variant?

[Speaking French]

>> Thank you. Have I missed any other reporters on the line?

All right.

Thank you everyone, that now concludes our COVID 19 update for today.

Stay tuned next week, for next week's COVID 19 update.

Thank you again to all our speakers, and to everyone on the line and the media who joined us.

Stay safe and stay kind, everyone.

