



Renfrew County and District Health Unit
"Optimal Health for All in Renfrew County and District"

For Immediate Release

(Pembroke, Ontario, December 20, 2023)

Local Health Units Join Voices to Remind you to Protect Yourself and Others from Respiratory Illnesses this Holiday Season

This time of year is well known for holiday parties and gatherings to celebrate the season. These gatherings are important to foster a sense of belonging, improve our mental health and bring our community closer. Respiratory viruses can spread easily when people gather (especially over holidays and in winter months). Respiratory illnesses can have a significant impact on overall well-being. We urge individuals and communities to consider ways to reduce the spread of respiratory illness.

Respiratory illness season has arrived – viruses such as COVID-19, influenza (flu) and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) are circulating at the same time as common cold and cough viruses. Protecting yourself, your family, and those around you at high risk of severe illness and complications is an important public health matter. Many people in our community – like older adults, pregnant persons, young children and people with weakened immune systems are at higher risk of severe illness, complications and hospitalizations.

"As with every respiratory season in the fall and winter, it is important to follow public health precautions, and especially to get your COVID-19 and flu shots" says Dr. Linna Li, Medical Officer of Health for **Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit**.

"We are urging everyone to do their part in reducing the spread of illness with the goal of reducing the prevalence of severe illness, complications, and hospitalization caused by respiratory viruses," says Dr. Vera Etches, Medical Officer of Health for **Ottawa Public Health**.

"This season, it is not only the older population we are concerned about, it is also children. Flu can cause severe illness and even hospitalization in children less than five. I urge everyone to get their flu vaccination; especially those under 5 and over 65." says Dr. Paul Roumeliotis, Medical Officer of Health for **Eastern Ontario Health Unit**.

"Influenza cases are going up in Ontario, and the best way to stay healthy is to get your flu shot," said Dr. Piotr Oglaza, Medical Officer of Health at **Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox & Addington Public Health (KFL&A)**. "If you haven't done it yet, now is the time to roll up your sleeve and protect yourself and those around you."

“During this time of high and increasing respiratory illness risk, we urge you to take public health precautions to protect yourself and those who are at higher risk of severe illness,” states Dr. Jason Morgenstern, Medical Officer of Health for **Renfrew County and District Health Unit**.

“The public health precautions we are all familiar with are still the best defence against getting sick and reducing the spread of illness to family and friends,” says Dr. Ethan Toumishey, Medical Officer of Health and CEO at **Hastings Prince Edward Public Health**.

The local public health agencies in the eastern region support [the provincial recommendations](#) for using layers of protection we know are effective.

- Get your updated COVID-19 and annual flu vaccine
 - Both vaccines are recommended for people six months and older, and can be received at the same time.
 - These vaccines reduce your likelihood of getting these infections and are particularly effective in preventing severe illness.
 - The best way to access these vaccines is at a local pharmacy. For a list of participating pharmacies near you, visit: <https://www.ontario.ca/vaccine-locations/>
 - Some people may also be able to access these vaccines through their healthcare provider.
 - Some public health units run clinics for those who face barriers accessing vaccines. Check your local health unit's website for information.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water (rub hands together under water for 15-20 seconds), or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched a lot, like desks, door handles, toys, and computer keyboards.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or sneeze into your arm, not your hand.
- Optimize indoor air quality as much as possible, which may include increasing the air exchange rate, changing your air filters, and keeping doors and windows open where possible (weather permitting)
- Stay home when you are sick
 - Stay home until you are fever-free (without fever reducing medication) and your symptoms have been improving for 24 hours (48 hours for vomiting/diarrhea)
 - If you have symptoms of a respiratory illness, don't visit those at high risk of severe illness, including those in long-term care, retirement homes or in hospital.
 - If you can't stay home, wear a well-fitted mask for 10 days after symptom onset. Avoid non-essential mask-less activities
 - Not sure? Do a self-assessment: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) self-assessment \(ontario.ca\)](#)
- Wear a well-fitted mask, particularly if you are at a higher risk for severe illness:
 - To protect yourself from respiratory viruses, to protect others at higher risk, and when recovering from illness.
 - When indoors, in crowded public places, and around those most vulnerable.

- Bring a mask with you wherever you go, so you are ready to use it if you feel the need or are asked to do so.

When to go to the emergency department

- If you have questions about your health (or your child's), call your primary care provider or Health Connect Ontario at 8-1-1.
- If you or your child are in distress (significant trouble breathing, chest pain, fainting, difficulty to rouse, confusion or have significant worsening of any chronic disease symptoms), go to the nearest Emergency Department or call 9-1-1.

The Health Units continue to monitor a number of factors, including the overall respiratory transmission and frequency of severe illness. Respiratory virus surveillance reports from each area have information about COVID-19 and flu cases, outbreaks, and much more.

For more information from your local public health agency, visit:

- [Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit](#)
- [Ottawa Public Health](#)
- [Eastern Ontario Health Unit](#)
- [KFL&A Public Health](#)
- [Renfrew County and District Health Unit](#)
- [Hastings Prince Edward Public Health](#)

While it is important to reduce the spread of communicable diseases (like respiratory illnesses), it is also important to care for your mental health during the holidays. Let's spread more kindness this holiday season. Here are some resources you, or a loved one, can access:

- [9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline](#): Call 9-8-8 or text 9-8-8 available 24/7
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868 available 24/7
- [Anxiety Canada](#)
- [BounceBackOntario](#) is a free, guided self-help program for those 15 and up
- [Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health](#) (CCSMH) offers resources for aging adults and their families