



Medical Officer of Health Report to the Board

Tuesday, March 26th, 2024

Health Protection

Emergency Preparedness

The Ministry of Health released a new Emergency Management Guideline for public health units that highlights the importance of strengthening communication and response networks with health sector and community partners. The guideline emphasizes the need for continual situational risk assessment and surveillance, the development and maintenance of emergency response plans, and the implementation of processes to test Renfrew County and District's (RCD) emergency response readiness. These activities, also in alignment with our strategic plan, are a high priority for the Renfrew County and District Health Unit (RCDHU).

An after-action review (AAR) for the COVID-19 emergency response has been initiated to enhance the agency's preparedness for future emergencies. This will involve a review of the timeline and events, review of relevant documents, a survey for both former and current health unit staff, a survey of community partners, and focus groups. The AAR will identify lessons learned from the pandemic response and formulate recommendations for future emergency response.

RCDHU staff are building the framework for a Wildfire Smoke Emergency Response plan, to be available for the upcoming summer season. This plan will cover health unit surveillance, preparedness, response, and recovery strategies following a wildfire smoke event. Collaboration with key community partners who support vulnerable populations is a central component of the plan. The plan will also carefully outline communications strategies, including the use of traditional and electronic media, as well as social media platforms.

Local heat and cold response plans, along with an air quality response plan, are under review to ensure their effectiveness and alignment with current best practices.

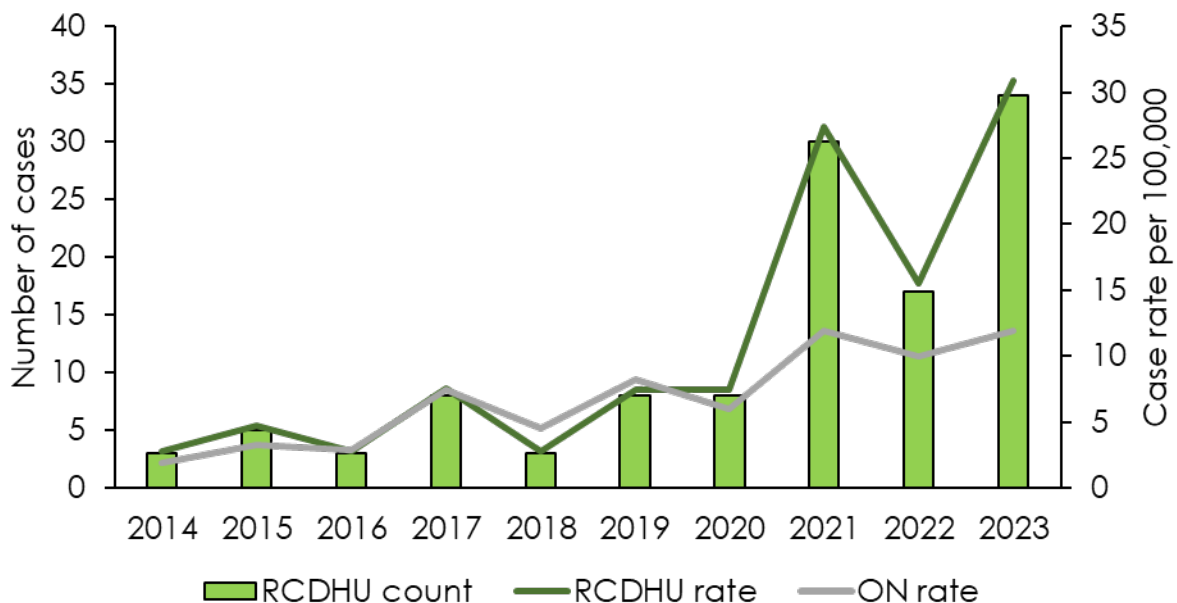
Healthy Environments

Lyme Disease:

Rates of Lyme disease have been increasing in both RCD and Ontario overall. In RCD, between 2014-2020, there was an average of 5 new cases per year. In 2021 there were 30 cases, followed by 17 cases in 2022, and 34 cases in 2023 (Figure 1). Local rates remain higher compared to Provincial rates, with the rate for 2023 nearly 3 times higher in RCD (30.9 per 100,000) compared to Ontario (11.5 per 100,000).

Of the cases reported in RCD in 2023, 2 out of 3 cases (67%) were male. Cases were from a wide age range (aged 2-79).

Figure 1. Annual Lyme disease case counts in RCDHU and case rate in RCDHU vs. ON, 2014-2023



Source: Integrated Public Health Information System (iPHIS) accessed through Infectious Diseases Query, Public Health Ontario (PHO). Last updated March 13th, 2024. Data extracted by RCDHU on March 14th, 2024. Data should be considered preliminary and subject to change due to ongoing data entry.
Note: Case counts include both confirmed and probable cases

We continue to address Lyme Disease through active surveillance (tick dragging), passive surveillance (follow-up of cases and receipt of ticks that were attached to humans), and communicating preventive information to the public, healthcare providers, and local media. Important preventive measures when outdoors include:

- Wearing light-coloured clothing
- Wearing closed footwear and socks, with long-sleeved shirts tucked into your pants, and your pants tucked into your socks
- Using an insect repellent with DEET or icaridin according to label directions
- Doing tick checks on yourself and your children after being outside, as removing a tick within 24 hours greatly reduces the risk of Lyme disease

- If a tick has been attached for longer than 24 hours, consulting your healthcare provider or pharmacist about possible preventive treatment

Lyme disease symptoms often include a bull's eye rash around the tick bite area, headache, fever, and muscle or joint pain. Symptoms can start from 3 to 30 days after an infected tick bite. The onset of these symptoms following a tick bite should prompt healthcare provider consultation.

Freshet:

Spring 2024 has officially started with the arrival of warmer weather and the spring melt, signifying the re-occurrence of the spring freshet due to snow melt. RCDHU staff are actively monitoring the spring melt through weekly meetings facilitated by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, with participation from Community Emergency Management Coordinators, municipal Chief Administrative Officers, and power authorities.

Sodium Levels in Beachburg and Haley Station:

During the week of March 11th to 15th, RCDHU staff collaborated with the Township of Whitewater Region to communicate recent sodium levels in Beachburg and Haley Station, which were 24.7 mg/L and 65.5 mg/L respectively.

Sodium (salt) is a non-toxic element and there is no established health-based upper limit for the concentration of sodium in drinking water. However, it is tested in drinking water systems every 5 years and notification to health units is required when the sodium level exceeds 20 mg/L. This is a precautionary measure, so that health units can notify local physicians, enabling them to take this into account for their patients on salt restricted diets. In addition to what is required by the regulation, our local practice is to notify all residents who use the involved water systems, to be as precautionary and transparent as possible.

The levels of sodium in the Beachburg and Haley Station drinking water systems are in compliance with the Ontario Drinking Water Quality Standards and are not a concern for most people. These levels are also comparable to many other water systems across Ontario, as sodium is naturally occurring in drinking water. Sodium in drinking water may be relevant for people who have severe high blood pressure, congestive heart failure, or who are on a sodium restricted diet. It is recommended that these individuals consider consulting their healthcare provider if their drinking water sodium level is above 20 mg/L.

The sodium levels in the Haley and Beachburg Drinking Water Systems were initially reported on January 19th to RCDHU. There was an inadvertent delay in addressing the reports. On March 8th, as per local processes, RCDHU communicated the sodium results to local physicians and advised the Township's municipal water system operator, the

Ontario Clean Water Agency, to inform the users of these drinking water systems of the increased sodium. RCDHU is reviewing its processes in collaboration with other involved agencies to improve communication of this information to residents in a timely manner and regrets the delay in notifying residents.

A [media release](#) was jointly issued by RCDHU and the Township of Whitewater Region to provide additional information to residents on these developments.

Upcoming Solar Eclipse:

Ontario will be experiencing a solar eclipse event on April 8th, with RCD located just beyond the path of totality (complete solar eclipse). The event is expected to begin at approximately 2:10 pm and last about 2.5 hours. RCDHU staff have created a dedicated [Solar Eclipse](#) webpage to disseminate public health information. The key message is that it is not safe to look at the sun at anytime, including during an eclipse, without approved eyewear. Doing so can cause partial or complete vision loss. Regular sunglasses will not protect people's eyes.

Staff will also engage key partners such as school boards and long-term care homes. RCDHU will launch a social media campaign to raise awareness of the event and its health-related considerations. Finally, RCDHU staff are actively involved in the safety strategy being implemented for the solar eclipse event.

Immunization

Measles Preparedness:

With the increase in global measles cases and several recent cases in Ontario, RCDHU has been promoting awareness about the importance of being up to date with the measles vaccine. On February 29th, 2024, RCDHU issued a media release, "[RCDHU- Encourages Residents to Ensure Up-to-Date Measles Immunization](#)". In addition, communication was sent to all health care providers and hospitals to alert them about the current measles activity and remind them of the importance of measles immunization, as well as the timely reporting of any potential cases. The Health Protection team has also been taking proactive measures to prepare for the potential identification of a measles case or contact in the area. As of March 2024, the overall coverage rate for a measles-containing vaccine among school-aged children in RCD is approximately 92%. To enhance the accessibility of immunization services to all individuals eligible for measles vaccine, RCDHU has hosted two measles-specific clinics, and will continue to monitor the need for additional clinics.

Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA):

As of March 9th, 2024, there are 13,134 (84%) students who are up to date for their required ISPA vaccines. Since January 2024, RCDHU staff have administered over 800 doses of ISPA-related vaccines to individuals born between 2006 and 2019. RCDHU

continues to offer school and community-based clinics for students to access immunization services and catch up on the required vaccines. Students can also receive vaccinations through their health care provider, and report their immunizations back to RCDHU, preferably through the online [Immunization Connect Ontario tool \(ICON\)](#), or via fax, mail, or email.

Grade 7 Immunizations:

As spring 2024 is here, the second round of Grade 7 school-based immunization clinics for Hepatitis B, Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) and Meningococcal vaccines is scheduled to begin. Students will receive their second doses of Hepatitis B and HPV vaccine. The Meningococcal vaccine is administered in 1 dose and is routinely given at the fall school-based clinics. Students who may have missed the first round of Grade 7 school clinics held in the fall months and have not yet been vaccinated through their health care provider, or at an RCDHU community clinic, will have the opportunity to receive missed vaccines at these school clinics. Approximately 40 school-based clinics are planned to occur from March 2024 until the beginning of June 2024.

Respiratory Infections

Outbreaks:

Over the past month, respiratory-related outbreak activity has remained relatively consistent, with an average of 2 new respiratory outbreaks declared each week. RCD has 3 active respiratory outbreaks (as of March 18th). We have seen a recent increase in influenza A outbreaks within our high-risk facilities.

Respiratory Disease Outcomes:

In the past 4 weeks, hospitalizations for COVID-19 (2-3 new admissions per week) and influenza (approximately 1 new admission per week) have remained stable. Since the end of February, RCDHU has confirmed an additional 2 COVID-19-related deaths. No influenza deaths have been confirmed over this time.

Test Percent Positivity and Cases:

As of March 13th, a total of 54 influenza cases have been reported to RCDHU. Provincially, test percent positivity for influenza A appears to have peaked in late December 2023 and currently sits around 8%. Percent positivity for influenza B remains low but has increased in recent weeks. With respect to COVID-19, over the past few weeks, testing percent positivity for both Ontario and Eastern Region health units continues to trend downward (5-6%). Our local positivity over the past month has been more variable, largely driven by testing related to COVID-19 outbreaks, and currently sits around 5%.

Wastewater:

Data for Ontario overall and for Eastern Region health units shows that COVID-19 wastewater signals continue to decrease after peaking mid-end December 2023. Local signals from both Pembroke and Petawawa sites have been at moderate-high levels over the past month. With respect to influenza, local signals for influenza A are at moderate-high levels, while signals for influenza B are rapidly increasing.

Health Promotion

Preventing and Reducing Substance Use Harms

In early March 2024, more than thirty Opioid Overdose Response Plan partners met for their first quarter meeting of 2024 to respond to the changing drug-related harms situation. Partners supported the creation of a steering committee and working groups to develop a community drug strategy using a four-pillar approach that includes prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and enforcement.

On March 7th, 2024, RCDHU issued an [Overdose Alert](#) to notify residents of an increase in overdoses and suspected overdose-related deaths in the Pembroke catchment area. This was the result of ongoing monitoring and surveillance of emergency department visits and the valuable reporting of the Opioid Overdose Response Plan partners. As a result of the alert RCDHU will increase surveillance and knowledge exchange with partners for both qualitative and quantitative data.

RCDHU continues to work closely with City of Pembroke Council and Staff to offer training and support to assist with strategies to serve vulnerable populations.

In February, RCDHU collaborated with County of Renfrew Paramedics to provide guidance to the Director and Supervisor of Recreation to address concerns with safety, overdoses, sharps disposal, and naloxone at the Pembroke Memorial Centre. Additionally, RCDHU staff consulted with Pembroke Public Library staff to share the same information.

In early March, I met with City of Pembroke Staff, the Mayor, Pembroke Fire, County of Renfrew Paramedic Services, and the Ontario Provincial Police to share information and gain an understanding of current strategies and potential future actions to support at-risk populations in the community. As outcomes of the meeting, we discussed stepping up harm reduction outreach and expanding naloxone distribution.

RCDHU met with United Way East Ontario to discuss *Project Step* proposals to the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education to expand youth mental health, substance use, problematic technology use, and addictions care to rural communities in Eastern Ontario. RCDHU will provide a letter of support to the United Way.

Municipal Alcohol Policy:

RCDHU Staff are supporting Madawaska Valley Staff with updating their Municipal Alcohol Policy to ensure it aligns with provincial liquor laws and outlines the appropriate use of alcohol on municipally owned or managed property such as parks, beaches, arenas, and community centres.

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