



Renfrew County and District Health Unit

"Optimal Health for All in Renfrew County and District"

Medical Officer of Health Report to the Board

Tuesday, September 26th 2023

Health Protection Highlights

Respiratory Infections

Over most of the summer, COVID-19 activity remained low. However, in the last month there has been an increase in community cases, test percent positivity, outbreaks, and COVID-19 hospitalizations. For instance, RCDHU percent positivity has risen from approximately 5% to 13% and 3 COVID-19 outbreaks are being managed, while over the entire June – August period there were only 3 total outbreaks. The local situation is similar to what is being observed across East region and the province, where COVID-19 activity began to increase somewhat earlier in the summer.

New COVID-19 variants continue to emerge, including EG.5 and BA.2.86, which have recently been noted. Currently, the significance of these variants is uncertain, and they continue to be monitored.

The fall respiratory pathogen response planning and implementation is underway. Education sessions and communications are being prepared for all facilities, such as long-term care homes. The infectious disease and communications teams are collaborating with neighbouring East region public health units to provide a coordinated fall respiratory season communications campaign. Additionally, we have conducted an internal tabletop exercise to prepare for possible respiratory pathogen scenarios this fall, while also participating in similar exercises held by Ottawa Public Health and Ontario Health. Lastly, alongside community partners, we are distributing rapid antigen COVID-19 tests.

Throughout our communications this fall, we will continue to emphasize simple and effective ways to protect oneself and the most vulnerable in our community:

- Stay up to date on COVID-19 and flu vaccines,
- Stay home when sick,
- Optimize indoor ventilation and air quality,
- Consider wearing a tight-fitting, well-made mask in indoor public settings, especially anyone at higher risk of severe infection,
- Practice good hand hygiene and cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze,

- Access testing and treatment if you are at high risk of severe infection (check eligibility screener [here](#))

Immunization (COVID-19 and Flu)

The first XBB 1.5-containing formulation of COVID-19 vaccine was recently approved by Health Canada. This fall, the new vaccine is recommended for anyone 6 months of age or older, if it has been at least six months since their last COVID-19 vaccine or known COVID-19 infection. It is expected to provide improved protection against currently circulating variants, including EG.5 and BA.2.86, as demonstrated in preclinical testing.

RCDHU anticipates receiving its first shipments of both the new COVID-19 vaccine and the influenza vaccine before the end of the month. Vaccine will first be distributed to higher risk settings, including long term care homes, retirement homes, and hospitals. Primary care will also receive initial supply of influenza vaccine for high-risk individuals. In the first week of October, combined COVID-19 and Influenza vaccine clinics are planned across RCD, specifically targeting high-risk individuals. Additionally, RCDHU staff will be supporting COVID-19 vaccine mobile clinics for Retirement Homes and Congregate Care settings throughout the month of October.

It is expected that starting in November, the new influenza and COVID-19 vaccines will be available for the general public. To support this, RCDHU plans to provide combined influenza and COVID-19 vaccine clinics across RCD during the months of November and December. Furthermore, the pharmacy channel will continue to serve as an access point to receive COVID-19 and influenza vaccine across RCD.

Everyone is highly encouraged to get this year's flu and COVID-19 vaccines, especially those with an increased risk of severe infection. Staying up to date on vaccinations continues to be the best way to protect against COVID-19 and the flu.

Immunization (General Program)

Over the summer months, RCDHU conducted immunization surveillance for all licensed childcare facilities. Presently, Renfrew County and District has 26 Licensed Childcare Facilities with a total enrollment of 800 children. As a result of this active surveillance, the number of children overdue for recommended vaccines to attend licensed childcare decreased from approximately 360 to 160 children as of August 31, 2023. RCDHU plans to continue supporting licensed childcare operators in their immunization reporting processes and to conduct further immunization surveillance in 2024.

RCDHU staff have initiated the first round of school-based immunization clinics for the Grade 7 immunization program. We estimate that approximately 1000 Grade 7 students across RCD are eligible to receive the Hepatitis B, Meningococcal, and Human Papillomavirus vaccines through these school-based clinics. Up to 41 school-based clinics have been planned for the fall months, with plans for round two clinics in the spring of 2024.

Healthy Environments

In the vector-borne disease program, public health inspectors completed 10 weeks of mosquito trapping over the summer. There were no mosquito pools that tested positive for West Nile Virus. Inspectors will complete the process of active tick surveillance (i.e., tick dragging) at 2 strategic locations this fall - Renfrew and Pembroke. Ticks were collected from spring dragging in these areas, so the protocol is to follow-up again a second time in 2023. The finding from the fall tick collection will determine if these areas become Lyme disease risk areas.

Within the Safe Water program, public beach water sampling took place over the summer season. There were 30 beaches sampled on a frequent basis until the end of August. RCDHU inspectors ordered the posting of advisories at 2 beaches: Cobden and Barry's Bay. Inspectors also inspected 60 recreational water facilities, including public pools, spas, and splash pads. Furthermore, as of September 11, 2023, we have inspected 23 small drinking water systems.

Under the Smoke-Free Ontario portfolio within the Substance Use and Injury Prevention program, public health inspectors carried out youth access checks at tobacco vendors and specialty vape shops throughout the summer. These types of inspections test the vendor's compliance with regulations regarding the sale of products to persons under 19 years old. A total of 42 facilities were checked, and we identified one facility that violated these regulations by selling to a minor. In response, this facility was issued a warning, and it is now subject to progressive enforcement with provincial offence tickets.

Health Promotion Highlights

Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program

In 2019, the Ontario government launched the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program (OSDCP), a 100% provincially funded program for low-income seniors who are 65 years of age or older and who meet the income eligibility criteria. Services covered include dental check-ups, teeth cleaning, treatment of gum and bone diseases, fillings, extractions, and some comprehensive dental treatment such as root canals, crowns, and dentures.

Since the launch of the program, 1145 seniors have registered for the program with the Renfrew County and District Health Unit (RCDHU). Currently there are 790 active clients with 252 of them being added to the program between January 1, 2023, and September 15, 2023.

A key success for RCDHU's OSDCP was the recruitment of a Dentist who is providing restorative care in the Barry's Bay Clinic and in the Pembroke Clinic. As of September 15, 2023, 119 clients have been seen by our dentist at RCDHU clinics.

In addition to restorative care, RCDHU provides dental hygiene clinics in Barry's Bay, Renfrew, and Pembroke. As of September 15, 2023, our Dental Hygienists have provided care to 371 clients.

A second success in 2023 has been the addition of agreements with transportation providers in multiple municipalities across the county. The OSDCP permits providing transportation to those clients who face extraordinary barriers to accessing treatment due to mobility challenges or lack of access to transportation.

A priority for 2023 is to further expand denturist services under the program. As of September 15, 2023, 125 clients have been approved and referred to a denturist to have their dentures repaired, relined, or made.

Mental Health First Aid Course

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a course designed to give members of the public the skills to help someone who is experiencing a decline in their mental well-being or a mental health crisis. The evidence behind the program demonstrates that it builds mental health literacy, decreases stigmatizing attitudes, and helps individuals identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness.

Renfrew County and District Health Unit (RCDHU) has staff trained to provide the MHFA Basic Course for adults interacting with adults and the MHFA for adults interacting with youth. The youth program provides additional information on eating disorders and self harm.

RCDHU hosted a MHFA Adults Who Interact with Youth course for caregivers of individuals with mental health concerns in May of 2023. There are three additional courses planned before the end of the year – September, October, and December.

For more information, visit the website: <https://www.mhfa.ca/en/home>

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