



## Medical Officer of Health Report to the Board

March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2026

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### HEALTH PROTECTION

#### **Immunization**

##### *Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA):*

Between February 19<sup>th</sup> and March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2026, a total of 1675 second notices and suspension orders were issued to students aged 4-17 years (born in 2008-2021) who have not met ISPA requirements. As of March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026, the number of students not meeting ISPA requirements had decreased to 1561, representing an approximate 6.8% reduction in students remaining on the suspension list.

Orders for suspension will only become effective if immunizations or a valid exemption are not reported to the Renfrew County and District Health Unit (RCDHU) before April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2026.

As of March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026, 23 community catch-up clinics have been offered at multiple locations across Renfrew County and District. An additional 15 clinics will be offered prior to the suspension date.

Immunizations remain available through health care providers or RCDHU catch-up clinics, with appointments booked online or by calling the Immunization Intake Line. Immunizations administered by health care providers must be reported to RCDHU through [Immunization Connect Ontario \(ICON\)](#), or by fax, mail, or email.

RCDHU continues to work closely with schools, families, and health care providers to support students in meeting ISPA requirements.

##### *Grade 7 Program:*

The second round of Grade 7 school-based immunization clinics for Hepatitis B (HB), Meningococcal, and Human Papillomavirus (HPV) started on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2026, and will continue until early June. Approximately 39 school-based clinics will be hosted across Renfrew County and District (RCD). Students may also choose to be vaccinated through their health care provider, or by booking an appointment at an RCDHU routine immunization clinic. As of March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026, two school-based clinics have been completed.

#### **Infectious Diseases**

##### *Respiratory Illness Activity:*

Seasonal respiratory illness activity has declined overall since its peak in December. Lower respiratory outbreak rates in the first half of February were followed by a small increase in activity

in the second half of February and first week of March 2026. As March progresses, respiratory outbreak rates remain high at an average of three per week. COVID-19 remains the primary pathogen identified in confirmed outbreaks.

Hospital bed occupancy rates have followed a similar trend to respiratory outbreak rates with low to moderate rates in weeks three and four, increasing to high in weeks seven and eight. Respiratory-related emergency visits remained stable in the vicinity of 10% since week three of 2026. Community test positivity rates of COVID-19 are currently moderate, and Influenza rates are low with Influenza B becoming the dominant strain. Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) rates have slowed to low to moderate.

## **Healthy Environments**

### *Food Safety Program:*

RCDHU continues to see strong demand for safe food handler certification. To enhance client-centered service, Healthy Environments has introduced an online booking system, allowing participants to register, cancel, or reschedule their own course appointments and receive automatic reminders. This streamlined, self-service approach makes the process more convenient and accessible for the public. In 2026, RCDHU has offered three courses and certified approximately 100 participants. This course is offered free of charge to reduce financial barriers, as some food premises must have a certified food handler on site during operations.

### *Recreational Water Program:*

Public health inspectors are completing public pool and spa inspections to meet Ministry of Health quarterly targets. During these inspections, inspectors verify water chemistry, safety signage, emergency equipment, recordkeeping, and overall sanitation and facility operation to ensure regulatory standards are met. There are currently 20 pools and spas in RCD, each of which is routinely inspected at least four times per year.

### *Emergency Management Program:*

RCDHU attended the first meeting for the 2026 Spring Freshet (snow and ice melt), which brings together municipal partners, Ontario government ministries, water power agencies, and the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan. The Freshet response is a coordinated effort to monitor water levels and support interagency communication on public health and safety matters, with the goal of preparing for and managing potential emergency situations, should they arise. In advance of the Freshet, RCDHU also reviewed and updated the flooding resources on its website and social media content to be shared with the public.

## **HEALTH PROMOTION**

### **Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy**

As part of the priorities of the Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy (RCDDS), RCDHU is continuing to integrate additional methods of monitoring the local drug supply into its surveillance efforts and as an evidence-based risk reduction strategy.

RCDHU will continue to provide fentanyl, xylazine, and benzodiazepine test strips for drug checking to Harm Reduction Program clients in 2026. Furthermore, RCDHU has added

medetomidine to its available test strips, a veterinary sedative that is being found with increased frequency in drug samples across the province. Collaboration is also underway for real-time sample collection, submission, and analysis with the Mesa Mobile Outreach Drug Testing Program (described further in the Outreach Team section below), in addition to partnering with the Toronto Drug Checking Service for laboratory analysis of samples and used supplies.

RCDHU has been consulting with the City of Pembroke regarding the possibility of their Wastewater Department participating in Health Canada's National Wastewater Drug Surveillance Program. This initiative will contribute to a better understanding of the local drug supply and provide insights into emerging drug trends.

In partnership with school boards, Health Promotion staff are delivering and evaluating prevention programs related to vaping prevention and cessation to grade nine students. Later this spring, staff will collaborate with the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) to provide safe graduation and impaired driving education to secondary students.

### ***Outreach Team and SPRITE Testing***

The RCDHU Outreach Team has partnered with the Mesa Mobile Outreach Drug Testing Program to offer mobile, real-time drug checking, which will allow individuals in the community to check their substances from the unregulated supply for their contents. This service supports informed decision-making and will provide valuable local data on the unregulated drug supply in RCD.

Syphilis Point-of-Care Rapid Testing and Immediate Treatment Evaluation (SPRITE) testing for sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBIs) continues at Outreach Team events and RCDHU's Pembroke office. The SPRITE Project Leads recently confirmed that a new grant was received, which will provide five years of stable funding to continue implementing and evaluating the SPRITE study. Additionally, a shortened version of the Locally Driven Collaborative Projects (LDCP) report was recently submitted to the journal "Learning Health Systems". More information can be found on the SPRITE Study website at [www.spritestudy.ca](http://www.spritestudy.ca).

### ***Nutrition – You're the Chef***

Implementation of the You're the Chef (YTC) program continues to advance through collaboration with local education partners. Later this month, RCDHU will work with Inspired Learning Coaches from the Renfrew County District School Board to deliver a centralized YTC training session at the Pembroke office. Eight teachers from various schools throughout RCD will attend the full-day session, which includes both virtual and hands-on components to support effective program delivery in the classroom. Participating teachers have been granted release time by their schools to complete the training, reflecting strong collaboration and continued interest in the program.

By equipping educators with the knowledge and tools to deliver the program, these training opportunities help expand student access to practical food literacy learning, including basic cooking skills, food confidence, and an increased understanding of healthy eating.

## **Safe Sleep Social Media Campaign**

March 9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> was Safe Sleep Week. This year's theme was "Safe Sleep – Everywhere Baby Sleeps." RCDHU promoted safe infant sleep awareness through a social media campaign targeted to parents, grandparents, and community partners who support parents of young children.

Key messages for this campaign included:

- Place your baby alone, on their back for every sleep
- Provide a firm, flat surface with only a fitted sheet
- Avoid all soft items like blankets, pillows, bumper pads, and nests
- Have your baby sleep in a crib, cradle, or bassinet

Links to additional information were also provided from the Government of Canada, including [Safe Sleep Tips](#), [Infant Safe Sleep Tips for Grandparents](#), and the [Safe Sleep for your Baby](#) booklet for more safe sleep tips.

## **PRIVACY**

RCDHU has undertaken a comprehensive review and update of its privacy and information security framework. This work has included updates to key policies governing the use and protection of health information, new protocols for privacy breach response and incident management, and updated mandatory *Personal Health Information Protection Act* (PHIPA) training requirements for all staff.

Enhanced security standards are also being applied to third-party information system providers, and a review of all systems housing personal health information is underway to strengthen ongoing oversight and governance.

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