

Canada launches serological testing initiative to manage COVID-19

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The Government of Canada is launching a task force to measure the scope of coronavirus infection in Canada and rapidly provide information needed to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and safely get Canadians back to work.

The COVID-19 Immunity Task Force will generate this vital information, drawing on experts from universities and hospitals across Canada and working closely with provincial and territorial public health officials.

The Task Force will use simple blood testing strategies to survey representative samples of the population for the presence of antibodies to the virus. Data from this major two-year initiative will provide insights into the levels of immunity in the [general population](#) and in priority populations, such as healthcare workers.

Key roles

Dr. David Naylor, Professor of Medicine and President Emeritus at University of Toronto, and Dr. Catherine Hankins, Professor of Public and Population Health at McGill University, will co-chair the Task Force's leadership group.

The Public Health Agency of Canada will also support an external secretariat for the Task Force that will help implement leadership group decisions and develop collaborations with international partners. Dr. Timothy Evans, Director of the School of Population and Global Health at McGill, will lead the secretariat.

Many people exposed to SARS-CoV-2, the [coronavirus](#) that causes COVID-19, don't show symptoms. As a result, scientists so far have been able to see only "the tip of the iceberg"—those people who are symptomatic and need care. "What we can't see are all the people who've been infected, but whose symptoms are so mild that they haven't been tested," Dr. Evans said. "Serological testing will give us a sense of just how many people that is, and where they live."

The base of the iceberg

"This is important, because if the base of the iceberg is very broad—many persons have evidence of being infected—this may diminish the ability of the virus to transmit as easily in subsequent waves of infection," said Dr. Evans.

Understanding how having had an infection correlates with immunity may be very helpful in guiding decision makers' efforts to improve workplace safety as the economy re-opens.

"Knowing how many Canadians already have some immunity to the virus following infection will provide a scientific basis for decision makers who are considering whether and how to relax some of the physical distancing measures that have been restricting economic activity," Dr. Hankins said.

After the first wave of COVID-19 peaks, understanding the risks faced by residual and subgroup populations could also inform targeted surveillance efforts aimed at snuffing out further outbreaks before they become epidemics. A better understanding of immunity levels could also enable a more nuanced and less economically and socially disruptive response to any further waves of infection.

Canada will work other countries in defining serological protocols through networks facilitated by the World Health Organization and the Wellcome Trust.

The Task Force's leadership group will include representatives of key agencies of the Government of Canada, of several Provincial Ministers of Health, and experts in serological surveillance, immunology, infectious diseases, public health, and clinical medicine.

"The investment Canada is making now in research will result in our country being better equipped to plan for the coming months. Some of the best health experts and health researchers in Canada will help us implement the right next public health measures to respond to COVID-19. They will also help us put in place strategies to support essential workers—based on evidence and on what we know about who has been exposed—and plan for the use of a vaccine," said Minister of Health Patty Hajdu.

Aligning researchers across Canada

The Task Force will align researchers across Canada with the aim of generating best evidence as quickly as possible to better inform management of the epidemic. "We would definitely hope to have the first study up and going in May of this year," Dr. Evans said.

"This important pan-Canadian collaboration reflects the great capacity of our country to mobilize scientific experts from across the country and help us all get our lives and workplaces back on track. McGill is very happy to be a part of the Task Force and to have been given the responsibility of supporting its secretariat. We will assist Dr. Evans and his colleagues in every way possible in order to quickly move this critical project forward and tackle this unprecedented emergency," said Principal Suzanne Fortier.

Provided by McGill University

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