

Q&A: How we can protect our health this fall virus season

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The fall season means an increased risk of respiratory illness as we spend more time indoors with groups of family and friends. We can help protect ourselves and others by getting the flu vaccine and a booster shot

for COVID-19 as cases for new variants rise globally.

What do you need to know about the ongoing risk of COVID-19? Mark Servos, professor and Canada Research Chair in Water Quality Protection in the University of Waterloo's Department of Biology, provides answers and educational resources. Servos and his team have been running wastewater surveillance for COVID-19 since early in the pandemic.

What does the Region of Waterloo wastewater surveillance system indicate about the trends of SARS-CoV-2 (i.e., COVID-19)?

Our Waterloo research team has been reporting on the trends of SARS-CoV-2 and its variants (the [virus](#) that causes COVID-19) in wastewater directly to the local Public Health Unit since early in the pandemic. Wastewater has proven to be a reliable and accurate way to track COVID-19 infections in the community. We have recently seen a rise in the virus across the region and a shift in the mix of the variants present (e.g., subvariants of XBB). This situation can change quickly. You can follow the wastewater trends at the Region of Waterloo's [public website](#).

Is COVID-19 still a concern and what are the ongoing risks?

Yes, COVID-19 continues to be a serious concern. Although COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths have declined in recent months, the COVID-19 virus continues to circulate in our community and represents a [health threat](#) to everyone. As we congregate in indoor settings and as new variants continue to emerge, we can expect COVID-19 to spread more widely.

People with COVID-19 have had a wide range of symptoms, including fever and chills, cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headaches, loss of taste or smell, [sore throat](#), congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting and diarrhea. There are also people that may be more susceptible to developing severe disease, so we need to work together to continue to protect ourselves, as well as others around us.

The level of immunity in our community acquired through vaccines and/or naturally means that for many people the likelihood of severe disease and hospitalization is reduced relative to the past waves. However, a large portion of our community will remain vulnerable, especially immune compromised and older individuals. Although COVID-19 can make you very sick, we must also remain concerned about complications of the COVID-19 infections that can impact your long-term health. Even people with mild symptoms can experience long term on-going health problems as a result of an infection.

How can I tell the difference between the flu and a variant of COVID-19?

We expect that the wave of COVID-19 this fall may coincide with other seasonal respiratory viruses, as it did last year. The symptoms of COVID-19 and the flu (e.g., influenza) are very similar and both can cause serious illness. If you are sick, you will not know what you have unless you are tested. You should always follow the Region of Waterloo health guidelines to protect your health.

What can I do to protect myself and my community?

We should all follow advice from Public Health Agencies that are currently encouraging everyone eligible to get the new vaccine as soon as it is available. The effectiveness of vaccines wane after a few months so

we need to continue to update our vaccinations. As the new vaccine anticipated this fall is based on a recent dominant variant it should work well at preventing [severe disease](#) caused by the currently circulating sub-variants. People that were vaccinated more than six months ago and are vulnerable or concerned should consult with their doctor.

People can still get exposed to COVID-19 and be able to spread the virus even when they have no symptoms. We all need to be aware of our health (COVID-19 symptoms) and help to reduce the spread of the virus to others who may be less fortunate and develop more severe symptoms. Our [health](#)-care system remains vulnerable and reducing the spread of COVID-19 (and other viruses) will help to protect our community.

We need to be vigilant and be prepared to respond as this virus continues to evolve and threaten our communities. Washing hands, social distancing, masking and vaccines have all proven to be very effective ways to reduce the spread of disease. Learn more on how to protect yourself from COVID-19 on the Ontario Government website.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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