

October 15, 2021

Dear parents, guardians and families,

I am writing to share my assessment that the pandemic situation is improving and to thank you for continuing to do what is needed to keep children and youth in school this fall. In-person learning makes such a difference for the well-being of children, youth and families. My outlook this fall is one of cautious optimism. I am hopeful that we can continue to have safer spaces to learn and work. Almost 90 per cent of people 12 and older have the protection of vaccines and so very few people are requiring hospitalization with severe COVID-19 illness now. Yet, a number of children remain unvaccinated and COVID-19 rates are highest in children five-11 years old. I know it can be concerning when you hear of COVID-19 cases in schools. We need your help to keep outbreaks rare and limited, so children and youth do not miss in-person school by having to stay home after an exposure to COVID-19.

How to keep your children as safe as possible

While many parents and guardians now have the protection of vaccination, it is still very important for families to continue to be cautious and keep choosing actions that make COVID-19 transmission to children and youth less likely. The most common source of COVID-19 infections for children and youth are household members. Daily screening for COVID-19 symptoms, physical distancing, limiting the number of close contacts we have, wearing a mask when indoors or in close contact with others, getting vaccinated if eligible and staying home and getting tested when sick or identified as a high-risk contact continue to be very important. Ottawa Public Health (OPH)'s [online screening tool](#) supports your daily screening. Please follow the guidance from the screening tool, including instructions on when to keep your child home from school and when to seek COVID-19 testing. Screening and testing help ensure that COVID-19 is not brought into schools.

Limiting close contacts, especially for unvaccinated children and youth, means:

- limiting the number of extra-curricular activities where there are different groups in close contact,
- choosing outdoor activities as much as possible,
- avoiding prolonged and unmasked indoor exposures such as sleepovers, and
- keeping social activities outside of school to smaller groups to make follow-up easier if there is a COVID-19 exposure.

Increasing testing options for you and your family

There are many new options for parents and guardians to seek COVID-19 testing for their children and their families, in addition to the COVID-19 Assessment and Care Centres. We have included a table at the end of this letter to summarize additional testing options in Ottawa; school take-home test kits – now available in every school for students when testing is needed, appointment-based 'Do-It-Yourself' test kits and we are working on Rapid Antigen Testing as another option. For more information on testing, visit OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVIDtesting.

Vaccines for children ages five to 11 are coming

In the weeks to come, we anticipate announcements from the federal and provincial governments that will make COVID-19 vaccine available for children aged five to 11. I know families will have questions about the vaccines and we are working with community partners to make sure that you have all the information you need when COVID-19 vaccines are available for your children. Planning is underway, and we will be ready to offer approved vaccines when they are supplied to us.

I urge everyone who is eligible for their COVID-19 vaccine to get fully vaccinated. This will help to protect you, your family and the community. The higher the vaccination rates are in our community, the better chance we have of protecting those around us and keeping COVID-19 levels in the community and schools low. My goal for Ottawa is to have at least 90% of our eligible population vaccinated. Vaccination can also help to reduce the burden on families; it helps parents and guardians get to work and students stay in class. When parents, guardians and students are fully vaccinated, they most often do not need to isolate after being exposed to COVID-19.

Communicating with you and your family

You may have received letters about people testing positive for COVID-19 in your child's school. OPH investigates all situations where someone in school tests positive. We work closely with the school to determine high risk contacts and to quickly communicate with parents and guardians of students who are directly affected. Usually, high risk contacts are limited to one cohort dismissed in relation to one person testing positive, but sometimes multiple cohorts can be affected due to a bus or recess exposure, for example. Rest assured OPH uses the most cautious approach when deciding who is a high-risk contact. The data supports that public health measures in schools are limiting spread: when one person tests positive in a school, it usually stops there.

When there is an outbreak of COVID-19 at a school, the number of children affected is usually two to three. OPH will respond quickly with targeted approaches to prevent wider spread. OPH may recommend school-wide testing and/or school closure if we think there could already be wider spread across different cohorts/classes; we are finding larger outbreaks can happen with multiple different introductions of COVID-19 into the school from household and community sources. If your household is directly affected, you will receive the information you need from OPH on the next steps you and your family members need to take. Please follow the directions given and seek testing if advised.

As a parent or guardian, you need information so you can send your child to school and respond if COVID-19 affects your family. I am committed to making sure your family has that information in a clear, accessible and transparent way. Feedback from parents helps us improve our communications.

Reaching out for help

As the pandemic continues, I am aware that many families continue to struggle. This has not been easy. You are not alone. Please reach out if you need help. Call 2-1-1 or visit [211Ontario.ca](https://www.211ontario.ca) to find out about financial and social support during COVID-19. If you need immediate help, call The Ottawa Distress Line/ Help Line at 613-238-3311 or The Mental Health Crisis Line at 613-722-6914.

We also have a number of resources on our website; OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVID19 and OttawaPublicHealth.ca/SchoolsCOVID19. You can also call our Ottawa Public Health Information Centre at 613-580-6744 to speak to a public health nurse.

I want to thank you and your children for your understanding and resilience. Over the last 18 months, I have asked the children, parents and guardians of Ottawa to do hard things to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and I want to thank you for the sacrifices you have made. Please know OPH is here to support you, your children and our schools. We work closely with school staff who have displayed incredible dedication in the most challenging of situations. We are all working together to reduce COVID-19 transmission to keep children in school and keep healthy in both mind and body.

Sincerely,



Dr. Vera Etches, MD, MHSc, CCFP, FRCPC
 Medical Officer of Health
 Ottawa Public Health

Summary of NEW testing options:

In addition to COVID-19 Assessment Centre appointment-based PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) testing, there are other testing options available for students, school staff and their families. Visit OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVIDtesting for more information and other forms of testing available in the community (including pharmacy and travel testing).

What	Who	How
School take-home testing kits (PCR)	School staff, students and household members who develop symptoms or who are identified as high-risk contacts	<p>An OPH and CHEO partnership to offer free take-home PCR COVID-19 testing kits. The take-home test kits include a combined mouth and nose swab that a child or adult can do themselves, or that can be done by a parent/guardian or caregiver. The kit - which is provided by the school - includes instructions, registration form and PCR swab test.</p> <p>All take-home testing kits can be returned to your child’s school during school hours or to the following Assessment and Care Centres during operating hours:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CHEO Assessment Centre at Brewer Park Arena (151 Brewer Way, Ottawa) • COVID-19 Care and Testing Centre - Ray Friel location (1585 Tenth Line, Orleans) • COVID-19 Care and Testing Centre - Moodie location (595 Moodie Drive, Ottawa) <p>School take-home testing is not a ‘rapid result’ form of testing. Tests are returned to a lab for assessment just like</p>

		if you were tested at an assessment centre. Results are usually available in 24-48 hours.
School wide use of take-home testing kits (PCR)	All staff, students and symptomatic household members of a specific school (Only offered in specific situations)	<p>School-wide PCR testing may be recommended for schools in outbreak if there is evidence of two or more cohorts in outbreak, if one cohort in outbreak may have exposed other cohorts, or if a substantial proportion of the school population has been dismissed due to potential exposure.</p> <p>Testing is offered to a larger group that may include all staff, students and possibly household members.</p> <p>If school-wide testing is an option at your school, you will be invited to participate and be given detailed instructions. Testing kits may be sent home with students OR can be picked up at the school. Results are usually available in 24-48 hours.</p>
Do-It-Yourself Test Kits – PCR (by appointment)	Children two months of age and older who have symptoms	<p>By appointment through CHEO- Brewer Park Arena location. Parents can test children two months of age and older who have symptoms or have been identified as a high-risk contact, using a PCR test. Older children and teens can test themselves with parental support. This service is not available for adults through CHEO. CHEO manages the online appointment booking system and booking form. To book an appointment visit OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVIDtesting where the form can be found.</p> <p>The kit includes instructions, registration form and self-swab PCR test. Once complete, the test kit is then dropped off at Brewer arena for processing at the lab. (not a 'rapid result' form of testing). Results are usually available in 24-48 hours.</p>
Rapid antigen testing	Asymptomatic (no symptoms), and unvaccinated children and adults	<p>This voluntary testing program from the Ministry of Health is for targeted use in certain schools and child-care settings. This form of testing provides results in 15-20 minutes. OPH is working with partners to explore how to implement this program in Ottawa schools. This method does not replace PCR testing when there is a greater risk of COVID-19 infection, such as for people with symptoms or who are high risk contacts (testing at an assessment centre, school take home testing kits are available for these situations). If a positive result is received on rapid antigen testing, follow up PCR testing is required to confirm the result as some positive results are "false positives". More information will be shared when the program is available in Ottawa.</p>