



Important Public Health Alert #5: Omicron BA.2 Variant

To: Chiefs, Health Directors, Pandemic Leads

Date: March 31, 2022

Two years ago, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic in response to COVID-19. The human cost of the pandemic in Canada has been enormous with at least 3.4 million cases diagnosed and more than 37,000 deaths. Over this same time period, we have gained a better understanding of how COVID-19 is transmitted; we have seen the development of six Health Canada approved COVID-19 vaccines; and we have access to COVID-19 treatments to prevent serious outcomes after infection. Despite having the tools to address the ongoing pandemic, the COVID-19 virus continues to surprise us with its ability to change and find ways to transmit more efficiently.

As we are catching our breaths after the Omicron variant swept through First Nation communities, a new BA.2 sublineage of Omicron is becoming the dominant form of COVID in Ontario and is likely to become the dominant form of COVID-19 across First Nations. What does BA.2 mean for your community?

BA.2 is part of the Omicron family and shares most of the same characteristics of the current BA.1 Omicron. The most important distinction is that BA.2 is more transmissible than BA.1, meaning that it will infect more people, faster. Current information indicates that the disease is not more severe with BA.2 infection. With respect to re-infection, it is believed that although rare, reinfection with BA.2 is possible after a BA.1 infection. Vaccination remains the most effective method to prevent infection, hospitalization and severe outcomes. Please encourage everyone who is eligible to receive their first, second, third, and if indicated, fourth dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Finally, oral treatments for COVID-19 remain effective against BA.2.

During this BA.2 wave, please continue to keep your communities safe by taking the steps that you have used in the past for other COVID-19 variants:

1. Ensure members of your community are up-to-date with their COVID-19 vaccines.
2. Continue to practice public health measures including continuing to wear masks during indoor gatherings when non-household members are present.
3. Use testing methods effectively – including the use of rapid antigen tests (RAT) to find infections. Please note that a positive RAT result does not require confirmatory PCR testing.
4. Let community members know, that if they are not fully vaccinated and have chronic medical conditions, they may be eligible for treatments if they contract COVID-19.

This advice is intended to supplement, not replace, the advice of local public health authorities.

Respectfully,

Dr. James Brooks MD, FRCPC

Regional Public Health Physician and Director, Health Protection Unit

First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, Ontario Region, Indigenous Services Canada / Government of Canada