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Local News

## 'The sooner the better' to get kids vaccinated, Drouin tells parents

Montreal's public health director is urging parents to get their kids to mass vaccination centres as soon as possible.

Michelle Lalonde • Montreal Gazette

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"We encourage you to make an appointment now so your child will be conferred immunity rapidly for the holidays," Montreal public health director Dr. Mylène Drouin said Wednesday. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

Montreal's public health director is urging parents to get their kids vaccinated at large vaccination centres as soon as possible, rather than waiting for their school vaccination programs to get underway.

At a news conference Wednesday, Dr. Mylène Drouin said case numbers in the region went up for the fifth week in a row and are now at about the level of the peak of the fourth wave in mid-September.

"It is not a rapid increase, but it is constant and now we are seeing an average of 250 new cases each day," she said.

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Mass vaccination centres across the region have also started vaccinations for kids aged five to 11. About 30 per cent of youngsters in that age group have either received a first dose of the vaccine or have an appointment.

Vaccination programs at schools began last Friday in Quebec, but only about half the schools in the region will host vaccination operations, said Sonia Bélanger, spokesperson for the Montreal health and social services network's COVID-19 command centre. The choice of schools depends on different factors, including space, availability of nursing staff and parking, she said.

"The message for parents is that if you are able to go to the mass vaccination centres, the sooner the better," Drouin said. "We encourage you to make an appointment now so your child will be conferred immunity rapidly for the holidays."

COVID-19 cases are highest in neighbourhoods where vaccination levels are lowest, she said, and these include Anjou, St-Léonard, Pointe-aux-Trembles, St-Michel and Côte-des-Neiges, where positivity rates are now above five per cent.

Despite the rise in cases, the rate of new hospitalizations in the region went down slightly in the past week, with 23 people hospitalized, four in intensive care. She attributed this low hospitalization rate to Montreal's high vaccination rate. Over 80 per cent of Montrealers have been fully vaccinated, and among those over 12, the rate is 91 per cent.

Public health officials are dealing with more than 180 active outbreaks this week, more than half of them in daycares and primary schools. There are only three outbreaks in health-care settings, and seven outbreaks in homeless shelters.

Drouin stressed that little is known yet about the new Omicron variant of COVID-19, one case of which has been confirmed in the Montreal region. That case was a doubly-vaccinated traveller, who is asymptomatic and is in isolation. She said she does not expect more cases related to be discovered because there was no community contact.

Public health authorities are following 50 other travellers from countries that have confirmed community transmission of the Omicron variant.

Drouin praised the federal government's decision, announced Tuesday, to test all travellers arriving in Canada from anywhere other than the U.S., and to isolate them while they await the results of those tests. She added she is glad the provincial government is being "more prudent about the holidays this year" and waiting at least two more weeks before announcing any loosening of restrictions on gatherings.

Until more is known about how contagious Omicron is, whether it causes more severe illness and whether it is resistant to approved vaccines, public health will take an aggressive approach to confirmed cases, she said. Anyone who tests positive for the new variant will have to isolate, as will anyone with whom they have had contact, even if doubly vaccinated.

Bélanger said hospitals in the region have prepared 500 extra beds in case the Omicron variant causes an increase in severe illness. These beds are not concentrated in designated hospitals, as in previous waves of the pandemic, but rather spread out among all hospitals.

Mass vaccination sites in the Montreal region include: the Olympic Stadium, the Palais des congrès, Décarie Square, the Dollard-St-Laurent Sports Centre in LaSalle, and the Gerry-Robertson Community Centre in Pierrefonds-Roxboro.

To book an appointment for a child or for more information, go to [the government's website](#), or call 514-644-4545.

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