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**Subject:** Ontario Taking Further Action to Protect Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes

## NEWS RELEASE

# Ontario Taking Further Action to Protect Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes

New measures being put in place to keep residents and staff safe against Omicron variant

**December 14, 2021**

[Ministry of Long-Term Care](#)

TORONTO — The Ontario government, in consultation with the Chief Medical Officer of Health, is taking further action to protect the health and safety of residents, staff and caregivers in long-term care and retirement homes from COVID-19 and the Omicron variant. These temporary measures will help reduce the risk of transmission during the winter months and protect the progress the province has made in stopping the spread of the virus and its variants throughout these settings.

“Our priority is to protect long-term care residents from COVID-19. Faced with rising rates of community infection and the emerging threat of the Omicron variant, we are immediately implementing further measures to protect our most vulnerable based on the best available scientific and medical advice,” said Rod Phillips, Minister of Long-Term Care. “These further measures build on the ones already taken, including mandatory vaccinations, priority for third doses and randomized testing — and will provide the best level of protection possible.”

COVID-19 cases in long-term care homes have fallen steadily over the past months due to vigilant policies and a high vaccination rate. In line with Ontario’s cautious approach throughout the pandemic and in light of evolving global evidence around the Omicron variant, the province is adjusting its COVID-19 policies in long-term care homes.

Effective immediately, all general visitors to a long-term care home will need to be fully vaccinated to enter. In addition, the ministry will be directing all long-term care homes to increase infection prevention and control (IPAC) audits.

The following measures at long-term care homes will also go into effect at 12:01 a.m. on Friday, December 17, 2021:

- Testing of all staff, students, volunteers, and caregivers, regardless of vaccination status, at least twice a week prior to entry into the home as part of enhanced active screening practices.
- Requiring a negative test upon entry to a long-term care home for all visitors and support workers who provide essential services to a resident or to the facility, unless they had a negative test the day before.
- Requiring caregivers to be fully vaccinated, unless they have a valid medical exemption or are attending to a resident in a palliative end-of-life situation. Caregivers will be required to have a first dose by December 20, 2021 and all required doses to be considered fully vaccinated by February 21, 2022. In the interim, designated caregivers who are not fully vaccinated would need to restrict their visit to the resident's room.
- Limiting indoor visits to a maximum of two people per resident at a time and outdoor visits, where feasible, to a maximum total of four people per resident at a time.
- Cohorting of residents for higher-risk activities, such as singing and dancing, and discouraging large social activities. This is in addition to the cohorting of residents during meal times, which is currently occurring.
- Limiting social day trips to only residents who are fully vaccinated and requiring those residents who leave the home for social reasons to be actively screened upon their return to the home and if they had a known exposure to a case, isolated and tested using a PCR test. All residents, regardless of vaccination status, can continue to leave the home for essential reasons, such as medical appointments.
- Suspending overnight absences for social purposes regardless of residents' vaccination status. Residents who wish to leave the home overnight for social purposes or due to COVID-19 may be temporarily discharged and need to follow the re-admission protocol to return at a later date.

To further protect retirement home residents and staff from the spread of COVID-19 and the Omicron variant, Ontario is also enhancing its COVID-19 policies in retirement homes effective December 22, 2021 to keep residents safe, including:

- Requiring rapid antigen testing for staff, volunteers, contractors and essential caregivers, regardless of vaccination status, two times per week prior to entry into the home as part of enhanced active screening practices.

- Requiring rapid antigen testing for general visitors and support workers entering a retirement home, regardless of vaccination status.
- Strongly encouraging retirement homes to restrict general visitors to only those who are fully vaccinated and implementing additional requirements for essential visitors and general visitors who are not fully vaccinated when entering a retirement home.
- Limiting the number of visitors and group sizes for social activities and events.
- Implementing additional testing and isolation requirements for residents when they return from an overnight absence.
- Instructing retirement homes to increase IPAC audits.

“Ontario is taking immediate action to protect the health and safety of retirement home residents and staff with enhanced safety protocols,” said Raymond Cho, Minister for Seniors and Accessibility. “We’re working with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority to ensure retirement homes are implementing enhanced testing and infection prevention and control measures to keep residents and staff safe and limit the spread of the virus.”

“As we continue to learn more about the Omicron variant and see its impacts on other jurisdictions around the world, it is critical we provide those at greatest risk from COVID-19 in our congregate care settings with an extra layer of protection against this new enemy,” said Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health. “By strengthening public health measures in these settings, we can ensure our most vulnerable are kept safe and shielded from the threats posed by Omicron and other variants of concern.”

The COVID-19 vaccine remains the single best protection against COVID-19 and variants. Every eligible Ontarian is strongly recommended to get vaccinated or receive their booster if they are eligible as soon as possible. To quickly increase our vaccination rates over the next few weeks, primary care providers and their teams have been asked to maximize resources and prioritize increasing capacity to administer first, second and booster doses as quickly as possible, while maintaining essential and critical clinical services. This could include the careful deferral of non-essential clinical services to further support local vaccination efforts over the coming weeks.

## **Quick Facts**

- All Ontarians, including all staff, visitors, and residents in long-term care homes, must continue to practice public health measures including screening at entry, masking, physical distancing, hand hygiene, and staying at home when they are sick. While COVID-19

immunizations have been demonstrated to be very effective, it is important for Ontarians to not let their guard down in the ongoing fight against the pandemic.

- As of November 30, 2021, data shows that 99 per cent of long-term care staff, students and volunteers are fully vaccinated. In addition, more than 86 per cent of eligible long-term care home residents had received three doses of the vaccine.
- As of November 26, 2021, data from the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority shows that 86 per cent of the retirement homes sector declared that 90 per cent or more of their staff have been fully vaccinated.
- As of December 10, 2021, data from the Ministry of Health shows that more than 83 per cent of eligible retirement home residents have received three doses of a COVID-19 vaccine.

## Additional Resources

- [Responding to Omicron and Protecting Our Progress](#)
- [Ontario Extending Pause on Lifting Capacity Limits in Remaining Settings Where Proof of Vaccination is Required](#)
- [Ontario Accelerating Booster Eligibility to Adults Aged 50+](#)
- [Ontario Releases Plan to Safely Reopen Ontario and Manage COVID-19 for the Long-Term](#)
- [Using your Enhanced Vaccine Certificate: Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- For public inquiries, please contact the Provincial Vaccine Contact Centre at 1-833-943-3900 (TTY for people who are deaf, hearing-impaired or speech-impaired: 1-866-797-0007).
- For resources in multiple languages to help local communication efforts in responding to COVID-19, visit Ontario's [COVID-19 communication resources webpage](#).
- Visit Ontario's [website](#) to learn more about how the province continues to protect the people of Ontario from COVID-19.

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