

Ask Ontario's Science Table: Omicron Edition

This slide deck was prepared by the members of the Behavioral Science Working Group and Science Advisory Table to respond to frequently asked questions about staying safe this holiday season given the 5th wave of COVID-19 and Omicron variant.





Ask Ontario's Science Table

Omicron Edition, 23 December 2021

Who are we?

We are scientists, clinicians and health system leaders living and working in Ontario who have been volunteering our time to evaluate and report on what the science is telling us about COVID-19 and what Ontarians can do about it.

We are also moms, dads, daughters and sons. We are doing our best to use what we know today to help improve our collective tomorrow, because we truly believe that through science, we will get through this pandemic together.

- Omicron is here and spreading fast. Rising numbers put hospital capacity at risk and put even more pressure on the healthcare workforce. Supported by stronger public health measures, our actions can help relieve this pressure and blunt this 5th wave. As numbers rise, **it is worth reconsidering how we approach the holiday season this year.**
- In the face of Omicron, no single action is perfect (not even COVID-19 vaccination). Think of each action as a slice of Swiss cheese: each slice has holes, but the more slices you use, the more holes get covered. During this holiday season, we recommend a combination of the following actions:
 - ✓ **Get your 3rd vaccine dose as soon as you are eligible;** and **the time is now to get your 1st or 2nd dose** if you haven't yet
 - ✓ **Consider postponing indoor gatherings. If you do gather, keep them very small and attend as few as possible** (and do not attend if you have any symptoms of COVID-19)
 - ✓ **If you don't have symptoms of COVID-19, use rapid tests (if available) immediately** before any indoor gatherings and self-isolate if positive. Remember that a negative rapid test does not mean you do not have COVID-19 and **other layers of protection need to be used**
 - ✓ **Breathe fresh and filtered air as much as possible:** gather outdoors, and improve indoor ventilation
 - ✓ If with people who do not live with you this holiday season, **wear a high quality, well-fitted mask indoors** and **physically distance** (especially if eating or if you remove your mask indoors)

You might have questions about how to approach the holidays this year. We answered some of these questions with the best advice we currently have as we continue to learn about Omicron.

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"All the adults in my family are double-vaccinated, our 8 year old child just got her first dose, and we have a toddler in daycare. We've seen the high Omicron case numbers. **How can I make sure everyone is as safe as possible** for the holidays?"

Omicron is here. Vaccines protect against hospitalization and severe illness, but 2 doses are not enough against getting infected with Omicron. Where does that leave holiday plans?

1. **Get your 3rd dose** as soon as possible if eligible. If you or someone you know is eligible and has not yet gotten their first dose, it is not too late to get vaccinated
2. **Reconsider your indoor gatherings over the next few weeks. Attend none, or prioritize as few as possible** and try to see the same people each time
3. **Keep gatherings small** – smaller than the limit suggested by your public health authority
4. **Plan outdoor activities instead** – outdoors is much lower risk, and a great option for gathering with children under 5 who are not yet eligible for vaccines
5. **It's ok to change or even cancel your plans**; it's not what we want but it's how we can stay safe with Omicron. Make sure to connect outdoors or virtually, and plan how you'll get together in a few months instead



"I'm hearing that Omicron spreads more than Delta. **Should I wear a mask at home when people visit?** If so, how do we eat together?"

Yes, wear masks this holiday season. Omicron is different from earlier variants and is spreading REALLY fast. Masks work for reducing transmission. That means:

1. **Wear a mask when visiting** those outside your household even if everyone is vaccinated
2. **Upgrade your current mask supply**, if you can, with high-quality masks such as a well-fitted blue surgical mask (or surgical mask under a cloth mask) or a KN/N95 (if available)
3. If you are eating with people outside of your household, **keep physical distance**
4. **When gathering indoors with those outside your household, even with masks, make sure to have as much fresh or filtered air as possible** by opening windows or screen doors (another reason for ugly sweaters!) and turning on hood fans, especially if you remove masks to eat



"I got invited to a few parties over the holidays – **what should I do to stay as safe as I can?**"

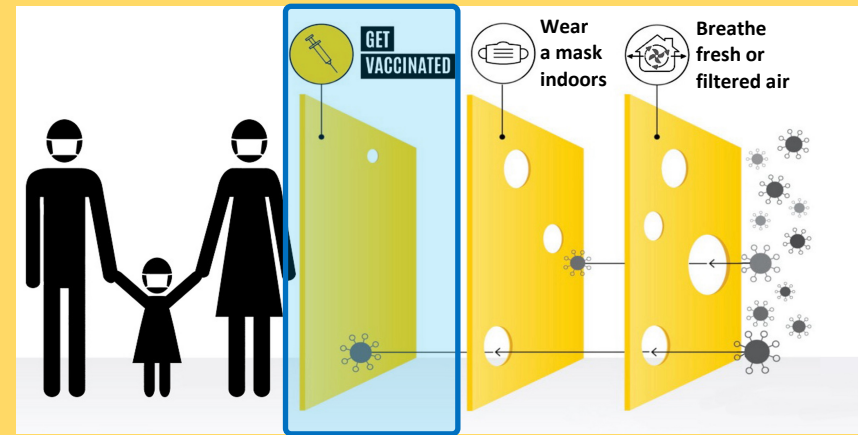
The best way to stay safe from Omicron is to **move gatherings outdoors or virtual, or postpone and plan** to gather once this wave passes. That's obviously not the answer we want to give, but limiting indoor contacts even if vaccinated is the safest approach while we learn more about Omicron. But we need parties, connections and celebrations to look forward to – so commit to a do-over in a few months once we get past the Omicron wave.





Protection Layer 1: Get vaccinated and boosted

No single action is perfect. There are holes. Like Swiss cheese. More protection layers = fewer holes.



“I’m double vaccinated; will this protect me from getting Omicron?”

2 doses worked well to prevent infection and severe illness for Delta. Omicron is not Delta. A 3rd dose is really important for preventing Omicron infection and keeping up your immunity. Everyone 18+ in Ontario is eligible for a 3rd dose 84 days after their 2nd dose. **Get your 3rd dose as soon as you’re able, especially if you are at increased risk.** If you or someone you know is not yet vaccinated, **it’s also not too late to get a 1st or 2nd dose (especially given Omicron).** Vaccinators are working over the holidays to give as many doses in as many places as possible. Consider helping people you know find an appointment if they need help.

“How safe are the COVID-19 vaccines? What side effects do we know of?”

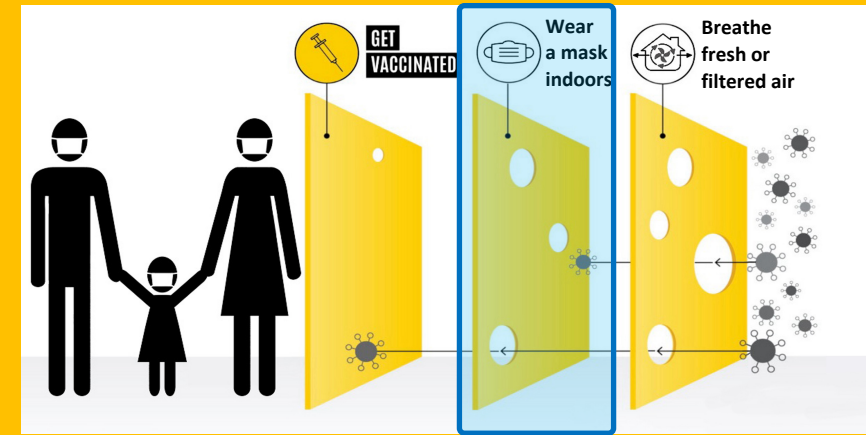
COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. More and more eligible Ontarians (over 11 million so far) have had at least two doses. Generally, you can expect a bit of a sore arm, some fatigue or a headache for up to a day or two, similar to other vaccines. Serious side effects (like severe allergy) are rare and treatable.

“I want to keep my kids safe – should they get vaccinated? What are side effects?”

COVID-19 vaccines were carefully reviewed and approved by Health Canada for use in children aged 5-11 in Nov 2021. **COVID-19 vaccines reduce the risk of serious illness and long-term side effects in kids.** Vaccines also **reduce their risk of transmitting COVID-19 to others.** As of Dec 20th 2021, over 7.2 million children in Canada and the U.S. have been vaccinated against COVID-19 and there have been 8 confirmed cases of myocarditis and pericarditis, all mild and treatable. Myocarditis (inflammation of the heart) or pericarditis (inflammation of sac around the heart) are exceedingly rare, usually mild, and very treatable. Remember: this inflammation can happen with COVID-19 infection too and at a much higher rate than vaccine side effects. Book a vaccine appointment for your 5-11 year old as soon as you are able, and feel free to ask the vaccinator any questions you might have.

Protection Layer 2: Wear a good quality mask inside

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More protection layers = fewer holes.



“Should I wear a mask when visiting family and friends over the holidays?”

Masks stop the virus from getting in or out of your nose or mouth and so wearing a mask indoors with those who aren't in your immediate household can help keep everyone safe. If you can, make sure you **wear a high-quality, well fitted mask when indoors** with people you do not live with.

“I see all sorts of different masks used; which masks should I use or not use?”

Any mask is better than no mask, but some masks are better than others. Given how transmissible Omicron is, **upgrade your masks if possible**. The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends wearing a **high-quality mask such as blue surgical mask (2 is better than 1: Consider wearing a surgical mask under a double-layered cloth mask) or KN/N95 (if available)**. What about wearing a mask outdoors? Not necessary so long as you can physically distance, but is a good way to keep your face warm!

“Am I wearing my mask correctly?”

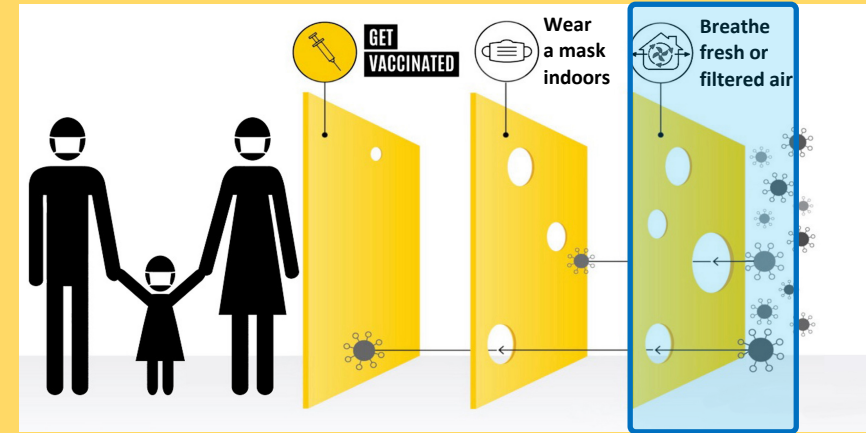
It's worth checking! We've been wearing masks for a while but we now know more about how to wear masks so they're more effective. The key is in the fit. Think of a mask as a filter: you want as much air as possible going through the mask, not around it. Search for 'Knot and Tuck' on YouTube for how to improve fit for surgical masks.

“How long can I wear a mask before throwing it out?”

Surgical masks and KN/N95's can be reused more than once and for multiple days if you let your mask air out in a clean, dry space. Dispose of soiled masks.

Protection Layer 3: Breathe fresh / filtered air

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“I keep hearing that COVID is airborne and it’s better to be outside, but how do I keep the air in my home as safe as possible?”

Yes, SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) is airborne which means it can float around indoors and linger unless the air in the room moves out of the room as quickly as possible. **The safest way to gather with those who do not live in your household is outdoors.** When possible, a safe way to socialize is to bundle up and meet for an outdoors walk or hike, at an outdoor skating rink or park.

If you are visiting indoors at home with people you don’t live with:

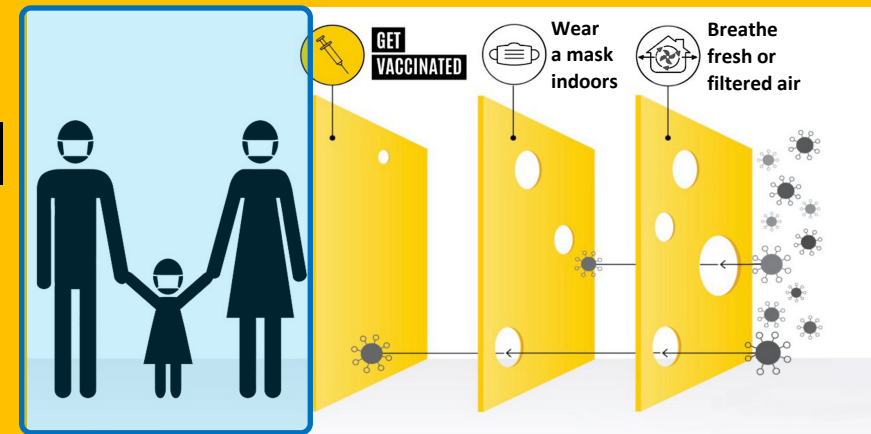
- **Maintain physical distance**, especially when having to remove your mask to eat
- If you have ceiling fans, turn them on and make sure they are pulling air upwards
- Change furnace filters (or ask landlord or building manager if filters have been changed)
- Run your HVAC under the “on” feature instead of “auto”
- Consider purchasing or borrowing a HEPA filter
- Turn on and leave on exhaust fans in bathrooms and stovetop when people visit
- **Open windows** or screen doors to **help fresh air circulate**

Protection Layer 4:

Postpone or keep gatherings small

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“How many people would be best to have at my home over the holidays to stay safe given Omicron?”

Postpone or keep indoor gatherings small: we are all desperate to get together and celebrate over the holidays. Consider postponing, but if you do get together, keep gatherings as small as possible. Attending large gatherings increases your chances of being exposed to Omicron, having to quarantine and getting sick.

Quality over quantity for this holiday season: if you do decide to safely connect with others indoors over the holidays, prioritize some gatherings and save others for once we get through this wave

“Should I use rapid tests with everyone before they come in my home?”

It’s frustrating that not everyone has been able to get rapid tests. We hope this improves. If you have access to rapid tests, ask everyone to do a rapid test **immediately before** visiting. If the test is *positive* stay home and self-isolate. If the test is *negative* that doesn’t guarantee someone doesn’t have COVID-19. Because the virus replicates quickly in the body, people can become contagious shortly after testing negative, so **other layers of protection (wearing masks, physical distancing, ventilation) are also needed to keep everyone safe even with negative tests.**

“I have small kids who can’t be vaccinated yet. Should we get together with others over the holidays?”

We know parents of young kids are balancing risks of COVID-19 with the need for support and time with loved ones like grandparents. **Rapid tests are not perfect and cannot always detect the virus so using them does not eliminate risk completely.** If your loved one is at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (for example: is elderly, immunocompromised, or lives in a retirement home or long-term care) strongly consider postponing or making the visit virtual this year; but if they do visit, make sure every layer of protection (wearing masks, physical distancing, ventilation) is used by everyone.