

Ontario stops short of mandatory shots

Public employees who don't get vaccinated will face regular COVID tests

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Teachers, doctors, nurses and other public employees will face vaccination mandates — but not mandatory vaccinations — as Premier Doug Ford draws a new line in the fight against COVID-19.

Other measures include allowing children turning 12 this year to get first doses of the Pfizer vaccine and booster shots for residents of nursing homes and people fighting certain cancers or recovering from organ transplants.

But in a controversial loophole, hospital, nursing-home, home-care and education workers refusing or medically unable to be vaccinated will be subjected to regular tests instead.

Ontario chief medical officer Dr. Kieran Moore detailed the changes Tuesday, saying it's time to spur vaccination rates with the more highly contagious Delta strain driving a fourth wave of the pandemic and the return to school approaching.

"We're making progress. It's just not quick enough," he told a news conference, warning more public health restrictions are being developed given lessons learned from the dangerous Delta surge in the United States and elsewhere.

"We are preparing aggressively for the fall. I am sorry to say I think it's going to be a difficult fall and winter ... the risk will be decreased the higher our immunization rates are," Moore added.

"We want to minimize the disruption of our economy going forward, minimize disruption of our schools, universities and colleges. And so, any orders would be targeted, focused and time-limited."

Epidemiologist Todd Coleman of Wilfrid Laurier University questioned why it took the government until now to put the plan into motion with a Sept. 7 deadline.

"We're sort of down to the wire on schools. They start in three weeks," said Coleman, a former official with the Middlesex-London health unit.

Critics said Ford's government didn't go far enough.

"No unvaccinated person should be providing health care to our most vulnerable. No unvaccinated person should be in a classroom with our kids," said New Democrat Leader Andrea Horwath, who two weeks ago flip-flopped on whether vaccines should be mandatory in those sectors.

"Doug Ford is pandering to anti-vaxxers," Liberal Leader Steven Del Duca said.

President Sam Hammond of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario said the



STEVE RUSSELL TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

A kindergartener sanitizes before going into Hunter's Glen Junior Public School. Ontario's vaccination policy for public employees will allow workers who refuse or are medically unable to be vaccinated to undergo regular COVID-19 testing.

union supports mandatory vaccinations, with limited exceptions. COVID vaccines are not yet approved for most elementary pupils.

"Given the severity and longevity of the global pandemic, it is not unreasonable for the Ford government to implement a mandatory vaccination policy in schools," he added in a statement.

"The province's voluntary disclosure policy does not go far enough to protect students and school staff."

Education Minister Stephen Lecce said he will introduce a "vaccine disclosure policy" for all publicly funded school board employees, staff in private schools and licensed child-care centres for the coming school year.

Similar vaccination policies will be implemented soon in other settings considered high risk, such as colleges and universities, retirement homes, women's shelters, group homes, day programs for adults with developmental disabilities, children's treatment centres and services for children with special needs.

Moore said hospital, long-term care, home and community-care workers and teachers and education workers who can't be vaccinated for legitimate medical reasons or refuse to get shots will be tested at least once a week at public expense.

That could rise to two or three times depending on risk levels in the community. But Coleman said two or three tests

weekly should be standard given the speed at which the Delta variant can jump from one person to another.

"It would make more sense," Moore defended waiting until less than a month before in-person classes resume for recommending the vaccination policy moves approved by Ford's cabinet Monday night.

"We had a sudden drop-off over the last few weeks ... it was unexpected and we've learned more about the threat of Delta."

Ontario reported 348 new cases of COVID-19 Tuesday, the lowest number in almost a week after five days above 500, but the closely watched seven-day moving average hit 473 cases — more than double the 201 of two weeks ago.

Four new deaths were reported and another 10 adults have been admitted to intensive care units with the virus, although hospitalizations remain low and well within the system's capacity.

Neither Ford nor Health Minister Christine Elliott were at the news conference with Moore, who maintained there was no need.

"I made the call to the premier and said we need directives in place immediately to best protect us in the fall. There was no disagreement. There was very good, unanimous support from cabinet."

Ford should have been shown up to take questions, said Green Leader Mike Schreiner.

"He's missing when Ontarians deserve answers to why more is not being done to avoid the

Your COVID-19 data hub

Reported cases in Ontario

Deaths	Cases
9,385	563,738

Daily update in Ontario Aug. 17

Deaths	Cases
8	433

Reported cases in Toronto

Deaths	Cases
3,617	172,353

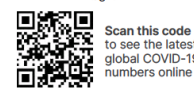


Source: Case data from provincial health units, current as of Aug. 17; numbers include both confirmed and probable cases. Testing data from COVID-19 Canada Open Data Working Group.

Confirmed cases globally

Deaths	Cases
4,380,559	208,485,060

Source: Johns Hopkins
Current as of Aug. 17



Ontario and global data may not match numbers reported elsewhere because of the time they were last updated.

The vaccination rollout in Ontario

Data as of Aug. 17, 10:30 a.m.

Doses given on Aug. 16	Total doses administered
40,626	20,254,502

% of adults in Ontario who have received at least one dose

82.5%

% of adults in Ontario fully vaccinated

75.1%

% of people age 12 and older who have received at least one dose

81.6%

% of people age 12 and older fully vaccinated

73.7%

% of total population who have received at least one dose

71.6%

% of total population fully vaccinated

64.7%

Shots given is not equivalent to the number of people vaccinated because most vaccines require two shots.

worst of the escalating fourth wave."

While Moore said the changes are intended to improve protection for hospital patients, nursing home residents and children, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association and the Ontario Hospital Association signalled more should be done.

"Given the immediate risks posed by the Delta variant, there may be a need for hospitals to move quickly to implement additional requirements," said president Anthony Dale of the OHA.

With Moore revealing the government is "reviewing" whether to make COVID-19 vaccination mandatory for student attendance in class along with shots for other communicable diseases like measles, "we encourage them to move forward on this important change," said president Cathy Abraham of OPSBA.

Children under the age of 12 are not eligible for the vaccine, although kids turning 12 before year's end can now get it after evidence in British Columbia shows "no risks were identified," Moore said.

Ontario is striving to improve vaccination levels already among the highest in the world, with 82.3 per cent of eligible residents age 12 and over having one shot and 74.3 per cent two doses, but Moore has said he'd like to hit 90 per cent to achieve "community immunity."

Pressure from opposition parties, health and business groups like the Ontario Medical Association and Ontario Chamber of Commerce for the vaccination mandates has been growing, along with calls for vaccina-

tion certificates for entry into non-essential businesses such as gyms and restaurants.

As first reported by the Star last Friday, the province will require doctors, nurses and other "patient-facing" staff in hospitals, long-term care and home care to get their shots or provide proof of a medical exemption. Anyone unable to be vaccinated or unwilling will have to be tested regularly for COVID-19 and undergo a vaccine education program.

Teachers and other education workers will face similar protocols. Volunteers, students on placements and contractors are included, as are paramedic services.

The province is also keeping current pandemic restrictions in place indefinitely, meaning Step 3 capacity restrictions continue.

They include limits of 100 people for outdoor social gatherings, capacity limits of 50 per cent in gyms, distancing between restaurant tables, proper physical distancing in stores, and limits on the number of patrons in theatres, cinemas, museums, concerts and bingo halls.

Moore said third doses of COVID-19 vaccines will be given to the vulnerable elderly and people with compromised immune systems — such as transplant recipients, patients with blood cancers on active treatment, residents of retirement homes, nursing homes — to put them in a better position to fight off the virus.

For example, evidence shows immunity levels in vaccinated long-term-care residents "waned significantly" after four months, he added.