

March 31, 2021

Re: COVID-19 Variants of Concern

Saskatchewan has detected COVID-19 variants of concern and they are increasing in a number of regions in the province. It will be important to follow public health measures to keep you and your family safe this Easter weekend and the coming weeks.

Normally, the genetic make-up of a virus changes over time. These genetic changes (mutations) may change the virus' properties depending on where the changes are located in the virus' genetic material. **Variants of concern (VOC)** are more transmissible (i.e. spread more easily) and may cause more severe disease than the variants that have been circulating in Saskatchewan since last year. Increased transmissibility will result in more asymptomatic COVID-19 infections, illness, hospitalizations and deaths.

Symptoms of VOC are the same as the usual COVID-19 symptoms including: cough; fever; shortness of breath; runny nose; sore throat; or other symptoms. The way the virus spreads is also the same; droplets and aerosols from speaking, shouting or singing; and transmission on hands and shared surfaces. The same preventive strategies will be effective, and are critical steps to prevent the spread of the virus, regardless of what variant it is.

To protect yourself and those around you, follow all public health guidance, including:

- Washing your hands
- Wearing a mask
- Practicing physical distancing
- Staying home when sick
- Get tested if you have any symptoms of COVID-19; and
- Following all public health measures in effect.

Saskatchewan recently started updating daily case counts and posting information about VOC on the provincial government's COVID-19 website.

Currently, there are three COVID-19 VOC that have spread globally; two of these VOC have been identified in Saskatchewan and one (B1.1.7 originating in the UK) has rapidly spread to become the dominant variant in Regina. As of March 23, 2021, VOC have been found in at least eight of Saskatchewan's 13 zones. The local impact is being monitored closely by public health officials.

Local public health officials have been working directly with school divisions, historical and qualified independent schools throughout the pandemic on prevention measures and in response to case, contact and outbreak investigations and levels of community transmission. Through these investigations school divisions determine whether individuals and/or classrooms should self-isolate and whether a school should go to an alternative level of instruction.

Overall, vaccination for COVID-19 will reduce virus transmission, including that of the VOC. The COVID 19 immunization campaign is underway, based on age as a main risk factor. As we move forward with bringing vaccination to all adults and with continued public health measures, we will bring the pandemic under control.

Thank you for all that you are doing to keep our schools and communities safe.

Sincerely,



Tami Denomie
Executive Director
Population Health