



First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, Alberta Region  
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### **Special Bulletin to First Nations Chiefs in Alberta**

January 7, 2022

To All First Nations Chiefs in Alberta:

I am writing to highlight for you changes to the ISC-AB public health response that are occurring as a result of the rapid increase in COVID-19 case counts due to the Omicron variant.

The Omicron variant has demonstrated a concerning ability to spread quickly, even in individuals who are fully vaccinated or have been previously infected with COVID-19. Fortunately, there is increasing evidence that the Omicron variant has a lower incidence of severe outcomes. The current concern is that, even if a smaller proportion of individuals infected by the Omicron variant require hospitalization, the demands on the healthcare system will still be substantial if a high number of individuals are infected in a short period of time. For this reason, we continue to encourage you to take efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19 in your communities.

The Omicron variant has been detected in most First Nations communities in Alberta and our active case count is now at 489, with many new cases being identified daily. At this point, it is best to assume that all newly diagnosed cases are caused by the Omicron variant. Case numbers have increased beyond the capacity for confirmatory testing of all probable cases, and comprehensive contact tracing is no longer possible.

The provincial laboratories will be prioritizing PCR tests for COVID-19 from certain high risk settings such as acute care and continuing care, as well as for those eligible for monoclonal antibody treatment. At this time, PCR testing remains available in most First Nations communities and through the provincial laboratories. Take-home rapid antigen tests are the preferred testing option in most community settings. Please see the [Alberta Health website](#) for up-to-date guidance on who should use these rapid antigen tests. If you are interested in receiving a supply of rapid test kits for distribution to your Nation members, please contact Erin O'Neill, Operations and Logistics Section Chief, Emergency Operations Centre at [Erin.Oneill@gov.ab.ca](mailto:Erin.Oneill@gov.ab.ca).

Due to the high volume of cases, many communities can no longer notify every contact of a COVID-19 case and, out of necessity, are focusing contact tracing efforts on high risk settings and high risk contacts as well as supporting immunization. The ISC-AB Medical Officers of Health (MOH) and Emergency Management teams, including contact tracing staff, will continue to provide support to First Nations communities to the best of our abilities. In anticipation that surge support requests will exceed availability, ISC-AB has reached out to regional and national partners for additional resources. However, at this time, surge requests may only be available for limited tasks or timelines to ensure equitable access across all communities.

Immunization continues to be the most effective way to decrease the impact of COVID-19. Early data suggests that three doses protects against severe illness, hospitalization, and death from



the Omicron variant. First Nations individuals 18 years and older are eligible for a booster dose provided it has been at least five months after their second dose. Children ages 5-11 years old are eligible for two doses provided it has been eight weeks between their first and second dose. All eligible First Nations individuals are encouraged to get immunized as soon as possible.

There are actions we can all take to decrease the rate of transmission of the Omicron variant, including:

- Getting fully immunized, including a booster dose as soon as you are eligible.
- Avoiding gatherings and limit social contacts as much as possible. Consider anyone you encounter to be a potential source of Omicron.
- Getting tested using a home-based rapid antigen test if you have symptoms or are concerned about recent community exposures.
- Wearing the best mask available, in the right size, so it covers your nose and mouth.
  - Mask recommendations for the general population have recently changed in Alberta. Individuals are encouraged to use medical masks. If medical masks are not available, individuals are encouraged to use the best mask available.
  - For healthcare workers, N95 masks are recommended for use when treating suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients.
- Practicing good hygiene, including regular hand washing and covering coughs and sneezes.

If you are infected, you can help prevent community spread by:

- Staying home for the recommended isolation period or as long as recommended by your community nurse.
  - Isolation is legally required for anyone that **tests positive for COVID-19** with a PCR or rapid antigen test **OR** for anyone experiencing **symptoms of COVID-19**.
  - **Although the isolation period has been shortened to five days (and no symptoms) in those that are fully vaccinated, measures such as mask-wearing should continue for a full 10 days.**
  - Note that PCR confirmatory testing is not required after testing positive with rapid antigen tests except for [high-risk groups](#).
- Telling your contacts that they may have been exposed to COVID-19 and encouraging them to get tested and to isolate if they have symptoms.

Finally, I would like to remind you that today, Friday January 7, 2022, there will be a virtual meeting between all First Nations Chiefs in Alberta, the ISC-AB Medical Officers of Health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, and Alberta Health ADM Trish Merrithew-Mercredi, beginning at 2 pm. This meeting is an opportunity to discuss updates and next steps related to COVID-19 and address your questions and/ or concerns.

I sincerely thank all health staff, community leadership, and band members who have come together to respond to this pandemic. With active cases rising once again, your ongoing partnership and support remain as crucial as ever.

Sincerely,

*Chris Sarin*

Dr. Chris Sarin



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Cc: First Nations Health Directors  
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