



November 14, 2022

Dear Alberta First Nation Chiefs:

I am reaching out today to stress the importance of influenza and COVID-19 vaccines to protect the health and wellbeing of your community. While the symptoms of influenza and COVID-19 are similar, influenza and COVID-19 are caused by two different viruses and require two different vaccines to protect and prevent serious outcomes.

Medical experts across Canada are anticipating a severe influenza season this year. Over the last week, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has reported rapidly increasing levels of influenza activity, a concerning trend noted in Alberta as well. As of November 5, 2022, Alberta Health is reporting 891 cases of influenza, with the first influenza case on-reserve confirmed on November 8, 2022. PHAC is reporting high rates of influenza among children and teenagers, 0 to 19 years of age, representing over 54% of confirmed cases over the last three months. There is also growing evidence that children with respiratory viruses such as influenza and RSV are being seen in hospital emergency rooms in very high numbers across Canada and Alberta.

Since launching the provincial influenza campaign on October 17, 2022, a total of 3,646 influenza vaccines have been administered on-reserve in Alberta. It is concerning to note that the number of influenza vaccines administered at this time is over 50% lower when compared to this period of time last year. The “flu shot” is safe and is the best way to prevent influenza. The majority of individuals do not have any side effects from the influenza vaccine and severe reactions are very rare. A [Toolkit for Promoting Influenza Vaccinations in Communities](#) is now available on the OneHealth website and can support your community health team in promoting influenza vaccine uptake.

High numbers of COVID-19 infection also continue across the province, with 1,095 individuals hospitalized as of November 1, 2022. Unfortunately, at this time we are also seeing low uptake of COVID-19 vaccine in the youngest population on-reserve across the province, and a low uptake of COVID-19 booster doses for those eligible. While having had the disease offers some protection against future infection, there's not enough data about that level of protection to know when it tapers off or how protective it is against new variants. Getting fully immunized offers the best protection possible from the virus.

Influenza and COVID-19 can cause severe disease and impact the operational capacity of the health care system. Both the influenza vaccine and COVID-19 vaccine are available at your community health centre, and can be safely administered to your Nation's membership, ages 6 months and older, at the same time.

In addition to immunization efforts, it is important to remember that there are a number of basic infection prevention and control practices that play a key role in preventing the spread of viruses and infection. As we move forward, it may become challenging to determine whether symptoms are being caused by the influenza virus, COVID-19 or the common cold. Therefore, if an individual or family is feeling unwell, it is important to:

- Stay home when sick;
- Practice proper respiratory etiquette (e.g. covering coughs and sneezes);
- Wash hands and sanitize; and,
- Ensure masking in crowded indoor spaces.

Individuals at high risk of severe disease are encouraged to take additional measures to protect against respiratory viruses including indoor mask wearing and to get tested for COVID-19 when symptomatic. The majority of First Nation Health Centres in Alberta are equipped with point of care devices/diagnostic testing to support COVID-19 testing. Many of these devices also now allow for expanded testing capacity inclusive of influenza, COVID-19 and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV).

Lastly, to support health service delivery on-reserve, ISC-AB now has surge staffing teams available to provide enhanced service delivery during times of increased need. Surge teams are composed primarily of registered nurses and are available to supplement Nation's crisis response efforts, public health and education campaigns and temporary health personnel needs. Michelle Liboiron, acting Zone Nurse Manager, is available to work with your Health Director regarding surge staffing and can be reached at michelle.liboiron@sac-isc.gc.ca.

As we move into the winter months and spend more time indoors, we are faced the reality of increased transmission of respiratory viruses. I appreciate the opportunity to work together in preventing the severe impact of respiratory illness in Alberta First Nations and look forward to our continued partnership in health. Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,



Dr. Chris Sarin
Senior Medical Officer of Health
First Nations and Inuit Health Branch
Indigenous Services Canada, Alberta Region

c.c.: Alberta First Nation Health Directors



Indigenous Services
Canada

Services aux
Autochtones Canada

Rhonda Laboucan, Regional Executive Officer, ISC-AB
Dr. Parminder Thiara, Regional Director, Primary and Population Health, ISC-AB
Lauren Bilinsky, Deputy Medical Officer of Health, ISC-AB
Michelle Liboiron, a/Zone Nurse Manager, ISC-AB