

On behalf of the Prince Edward County Family Health Team...

Triple Jeopardy – COVID fatigue, lockdown release and rising Variants of Concern.

February is over but spring has not sprung. COVID fatigue is moving into exhaustion. We want to escape the cold and isolation, to return to some normal social life. While release from lockdown provincially and return to green status locally may imply safety - if we social distance, wear masks etc., there is this looming threat from the Variants of Concern (VOC).... What does this all mean? Can we stay safe and sane?

Variants have genetic mutations, changes in genes that make them to look or act differently. These are normal and expected processes that help all living things to survive as their world changes. While humans evolve over eons, viruses evolve over weeks/months. Variants are identified and labeled by these mutations. VOCs have mutations that make the virus more dangerous to us in some way. Of the 3 VOCs in Ontario, the most common, B117 is concerning because it spreads so quickly and easily, making even short, **unprotected** interactions risky. Staying safe means learning to manage your risks.

COVID enters the body through your mouth, nose and rarely, your eyes. Breathing moves air and virus particles if present, into and out of your body. **More virus in, more risk of infection.** Breathing harder, faster and deeper brings more virus in and sends more out, further and faster. Talking expels more virus than breathing, shouting, laughing, singing even more. In still air, heavy virus particles fall to the ground, but lighter particles linger. Outside, airborne virus blows away but indoors can linger for minutes to hours. Movement keeps particles from settling and spreads them around the room. So, a library where people are quiet and still has lower risk than a nightclub where people are shouting and dancing.

Worn properly, masks are the most effective way to reduce how much virus you inhale or exhale. As air moves through the mask, particles are filtered out. However, effective filters are like a pile-up on the 401, everyone tries to detour around the slowdown. Any opening around the mask provides barrier-free passage to the virus. A tightly fitting, multi-layer cotton mask with minimal air leak, may be more effective than a medical mask that isn't closed over your nose or gapes at the sides. Properly fitted N95 masks have highly effective filters and no air leak. Face shields, however, have 100 % air leak, providing no protection from airborne virus. They do protect against large droplets, making them a good addition if you are close to people who are coughing, sneezing, yelling or spitting. Double masking means wearing both a well-fitting fabric mask with a medical mask to combine the benefits. Masks work by collecting infectious particles, so **always clean your hands after touching your mask. Put used masks in a paper bag** until they can be washed or disposed of properly.

Currently, most daily activities in the County are lower risk so wear a well fitted multilayer cotton or medical mask. If you leave the area or engage in higher risk activities, consider adding a medical mask over or under your fabric one. If you spend long periods in high-risk settings, consider using N95 or equivalent masks. **Any indoor activity where you are not continually wearing a mask could be risky.** Activities where you breath hard, cough, laugh or shout are safest outside and if you are in a group and not moving, consider masks for extra protection.

For more information, see www.pefht.ca

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