

York's teams eager to administer vaccines

By Mark PavilonisEditorLocal Journalism Initiative

York residents 80 and older can book appointments to get their COVID-19 vaccinations. York began taking appointments Monday, and you can book yours by visiting york.ca/COVID19Vaccine. Approximately 20,000 appointments were booked across all five current COVID-19 vaccination clinics. "This is great news for many of our most vulnerable residents and another step forward in bringing an end to the pandemic through vaccination," said York Region Chairman and CEO Wayne Emmerson. "The health and well-being of our residents continues to remain a priority and we thank public, private and health-care partners for their major role in helping to protect some of our most vulnerable residents." Residents 80 years of age and older who are not able or comfortable booking an online appointment are encouraged to seek out a support person (caregiver, family member or friend) who can assist in booking this appointment on their behalf. York Region Public Health is working with our local health-care partners to provide COVID-19 vaccines for this newly eligible priority group at Cortellucci Vaughan Hospital located in the City of Vaughan, operated by Mackenzie Health; Cornell Community Centre located in the City of Markham, operated by Eastern York Region North Durham (EYRND) Ontario Health Team (OHT), and Ray Twinney Recreation Complex located in the Town of Newmarket, operated by Southlake Regional Health Centre. "This is a very positive step forward. We are moving aggressively to vaccinate as many as possible within the province's identified priority populations as vaccine supply becomes available," said Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Medical Officer of Health. "We are being as nimble as we can using different delivery models depending on the supplies of vaccines and the groups we need to immunize." Walk-in appointments are not available; please do not visit a vaccination clinic without an appointment. You will be turned away. The team at Southlake Regional Health Centre is ready and well equipped to administer COVID vaccines. Not only are staff backed by months of preparation and procedures, the current vaccines are proving effective. Staff and medical experts are confident they have the situation well in hand, and can ably spring into action should a third wave arrive. As of Feb. 25, Southlake was treating 15 COVID-19 patients, with five in critical care beds. Dr. Charmaine van Schaik, co-medical lead, Vaccine Management Committee at Southlake Regional Health Centre, is eager to get the process rolling. While the hospital has no control over vaccine rollout, they're administering both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. The majority of long-term care residents, staff and front-line hospital workers have received both the first and second doses. Both are two-shot doses and the main difference is storage. The Pfizer vaccine has to be kept very cold, and requires special refrigeration, while the Moderna vaccine isn't as temperature sensitive. Dr. van Schaik pointed out there have been very few adverse reactions to the vaccine, and staff are well equipped to handle any reactions. The mRNA vaccines, she explained, basically send instructions for our cells to make a harmless piece of the "spike protein" found on the surface of the virus that causes COVID-19. It triggers an immune response, teaching our bodies to fight. Dr. van Schaik said it's not yet known whether follow-up or annual shots are necessary. The research and monitoring is still ongoing. Time will tell just how long the immune response stays in our bodies and whether it wears off. Initially, there were fears that those with certain food allergies couldn't take the vaccines, but Dr. van Schaik said that's not true. "The only allergy is to the 'recipe' of the vaccine, which contains Polyethylene glycol. She said a common pain reliever such as Tylenol contains this substance. Research continues on vaccines aimed at children. So far, the research has concentrated on adults and seniors. There's no question the answers will come, given the rapid pace of vaccine research. Dr. van Schaik noted the majority of recipients are grateful and positive to receive the vaccine. Citizens and staff are all getting more used to the procedure and efficacy of the vaccines. "We're really happy to be getting more and more people vaccinated," she said. They're excited about getting the vaccine out to the greater population, especially vulnerable seniors, and "those who need it." The vaccine, she stressed, is not a cure, but it does prevent or lessen the severity of the illness. What we don't know is whether vaccinated individuals can still spread the virus. That's why existing health measures are required and still enforced. While treatment opportunities continue to improve, masks may be with us for some time. Those with compromised immune systems should always wear them. Dr. van Schaik said York's numbers have been stabilizing, but many do expect a third wave. She said they believe it will be similar to the current wave, led primarily by the more contagious variants. The key is for medical practitioners to be nimble and respond quickly. With York's accelerated rollout, and experienced practitioners at the helm, residents are in good hands.