



## Windsor-Essex County Health Unit Board of Health

### INFORMATION REPORT

**Prepared By:** Healthy Schools Department - Immunization

**Date:** September 21, 2023

**Subject:** Seasonal Influenza and COVID-19 Season 2023/2024

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#### **BACKGROUND**

##### ***Influenza (flu) Vaccine***

The Windsor-Essex County Health Unit (WECHU) plays a key role in the implementation of the Ministry of Health's Universal Influenza Immunization Program (UIIP) which offers influenza vaccine free of charge each year to all individuals six months of age and older who live, work, or attend school in Ontario.

Under the UIIP, the provincial supply of influenza vaccine doses is received from the Ontario Government Pharmacy (OGP) in predetermined increments dependent on vaccine availability. The WECHU receives influenza vaccine shipments from OGP and is responsible for the distribution to health care providers and facilities in the community. Allocation to providers is based on total community allocation, number of clients to be served, past usage by the provider, available fridge space, and the proportion of high-risk clients the provider is responsible for. Community Immunization Providers (e.g., primary care providers, hospitals, long-term care homes (LTCH) and retirement homes (RH)) order influenza vaccine from the WECHU, starting in September.

##### ***COVID-19 Vaccine***

In July 2023, the Ontario Ministry of Health, recommended that Ontarians aged 5 years and older delay getting a COVID-19 booster until the fall. Receiving a booster dose in the fall, as respiratory season commences, will maximize protection against COVID-19 outcomes when peak circulation of the virus is likely to occur with other seasonal respiratory viruses.

Currently, the WECHU is administering primary doses of COVID-19 vaccines at their in-house clinics at the Windsor and Leamington offices. The Healthy Schools Immunization Team is supporting families of school aged children this summer by offering COVID-19 education and immunizations to individuals who want to be vaccinated at upcoming [School Readiness Events](#).

In addition, any pharmacy that is participating in the annual UIIP is encouraged to also participate in the COVID-19 vaccine administration program. Pharmacies who have been approved to administer COVID-19 vaccine are required to have a cold chain inspection on the vaccine refrigerator(s) that will be storing publicly funded influenza vaccines.

### **CURRENT INITIATIVES**

Throughout the year, the WECHU has completed 366 vaccine fridge inspections throughout Windsor and Essex County (WEC) for health care providers, pharmacies, agencies, long-term care and retirement homes planning to administer influenza and COVID-19 vaccines this fall.

Eighty-four out of 120 local pharmacies that applied to manage and administer fall vaccines were approved by the Ontario Ministry of Health to provide both influenza and COVID-19 vaccine. Thirty-six pharmacies that were approved to provide influenza did not apply to administer COVID-19 vaccine. Participating pharmacists may only administer publicly funded influenza vaccine to individuals 2 years of age and older. While pharmacists can administer COVID-19 vaccine for individuals 6 months and older, they generally administer COVID-19 vaccine to individuals 2 years and older.

In preparation for, and over the course of the respiratory virus season, the WECHU maintains ongoing communication with all health care providers and pharmacies and relays information about the timelines for vaccine availability. Tailored information packages including vaccine product information, ordering information, and promotional materials are also compiled and distributed to providers by the WECHU each influenza season.

Community immunization providers are encouraged to help increase access and uptake of influenza and COVID-19 vaccines by offering co-administration of COVID-19 and influenza vaccine. To support widespread availability of both the influenza and COVID-19 vaccine in our community, the WECHU is working collaboratively with many community partners, including hospitals, operators of congregate living facilities, and primary care, to identify service gaps and opportunities to increase vaccine uptake. The WECHU will be supporting COVID-19 vaccine clinics, with a focus on prioritized populations and high-risk individuals; individuals attending these clinics will also have an opportunity to receive influenza vaccine at the same time.

The Ontario Ministry of Health has indicated that the timeline for the influenza and COVID-19 vaccine rollout will be aligned in the coming months. Initial inventory shipments are expected by the end of September/early October. The first allocation would target vaccine administration in hospitals, long-term care, and retirement homes. The second allocation would target high-risk groups for influenza and COVID-19 related complications or hospitalization. The third allocation targets the entire population and is expected in November.

The WECHU will be running a communication campaign from October to December to raise awareness of the risks of contracting seasonal respiratory illnesses (e.g., influenza and COVID-19), and the importance of getting vaccinated, especially for individuals who are part of a high-risk group. Targeted, organic social media ads and print materials, and articles will be developed to communicate key messages.