

Control of the Omicron Variant in Newfoundland and Labrador

Objective

To describe COVID-19 interventions undertaken to control the Omicron wave in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL).

Practice Points

1. On 26 Nov 2021, the World Health Organization named the Omicron variant of the coronavirus a new variant of concern. Travel to Canada (CA) (and around the world) from certain countries was banned.
2. Observational data suggested the Omicron variant was less severe but more transmissible and could still be severe in certain high-risk groups.
3. Initial COVID-19 vaccines protected against severe disease, hospitalizations and death due to infection with the Omicron variant. However, breakthrough infections and reinfection after prior infection with other variants did occur.
4. The Omicron variant was first reported in NL on 15 Dec 2021.

Methods

1. Data on hospital occupancy and death was obtained from the provincial government COVID-19 dashboard from 01 Dec 2021 to Sep 2022. Hospital occupancy included two groups: those admitted due to COVID-19 and those with coincident COVID-19. The number of new deaths was reported weekly as of 11 May 2022.
2. A description of the various types of interventions imposed and the mitigation of those restrictions was obtained from provincial government news releases from Dec 2021 to Mar 2022.
3. Lifting of restrictions was based on projected hospitalization rates.

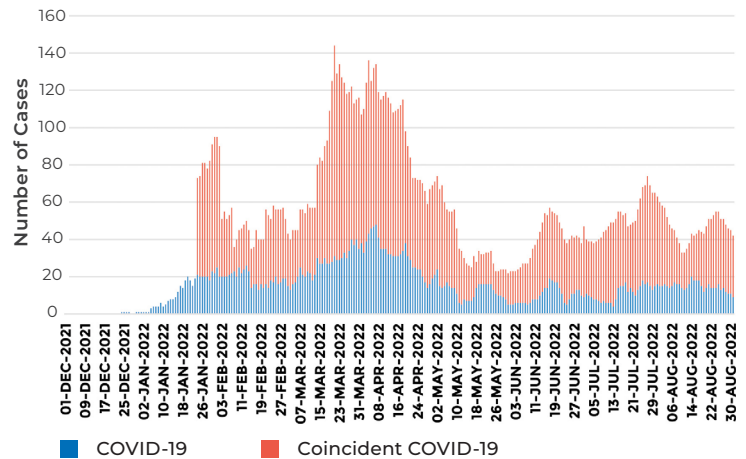


Figure 1. Hospital Occupancy (Includes Those Admitted Because of COVID-19 and Those With Coincident COVID-19), Dec 2021 – Aug 2022

- From 3 Feb 2022, the definition of hospitalizations “with COVID-19” underwent some changes in method of determination/collection so the number of coincidental COVID-19 is less.
- On lifting restrictions, a projected increase in hospitalizations occurred but peaked by around mid-April 2022.

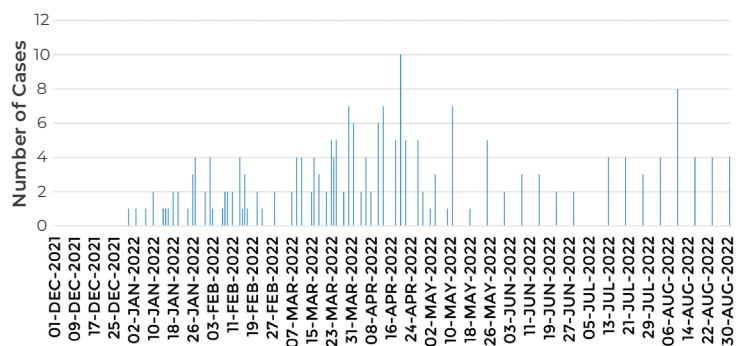


Figure 2. Incidence of COVID-19 Associated Deaths, Dec 2021 – Aug 2022

- The number of COVID-19 deaths increased for the month following lifting of restrictions on 14 Mar 2022.

Table 1. 2022 Reopening Plan, Jan – Mar 2022

Key Public Health Measures	Modified Alert Level 4 (4 Jan)	Modified Alert Level 3 (7 Feb)	14 Feb	21/28 Feb	14 Mar
Informal Gatherings	Limited to your Tight 10.	Limited to your household's Steady 20.	Limited to 20 people.	21 Feb – Limited to 25 people.	No restrictions.
Gatherings at Funerals, Burials, Weddings, Religious & Cultural Ceremonies	Limited to no more than 50 people or 25% capacity, whichever is less.	No change.	12 Feb – Limited to 50% capacity; Faith based ceremonies 50% capacity with vaccine passport or 25% capacity without.	21 Feb – Faith based ceremonies 75% capacity with vaccine passport or 50% capacity without.	No restrictions.
Public Visitations & Wakes	One household bubble can visit at a time. 23 Dec – Wakes prohibited.	No change.	No change.	21 Feb – Public visitations limited to 50% capacity per room; Wakes held outside of a funeral home/place of worship limited to 25 people. 28 Feb – Public visitations limited to 75% capacity per room.	No restrictions.
Gym & Fitness Facilities, Yoga Studios, Swimming Pools, Tennis and Squash Facilities, Arenas & Dance Studios	Limited to 50 people or 25% capacity per room or ice surface, whichever is less.	50% capacity per room or ice surface.	No change.	21 Feb – 75% capacity per room or ice surface.	No restrictions.
Performance Spaces	23 Dec – Closed.	Limited to 50 people or 25% capacity per room, whichever is less. No food or drink permitted.	50% capacity; Food or drink is permitted provided physical distancing maintained between bubbles.	28 Feb – 75% capacity.	No restrictions.
Group & Team Sport, Art & Recreation Activities	Group and team sport, arts and recreation activities suspended.	Practice and training permitted within the group or team, without the requirement to physically distance at all times. Competition between different teams not permitted.	Amateur sports and recreation can play games within their usual region; Competition permitted against one single team per day. Tournaments not permitted.	21 Feb – Out of region amateur sport and recreation activities permitted. Tournaments not permitted.	No restrictions.
Visitor Restrictions for Acute Care, Long-Term Care (LTC), Personal Care Homes (PCHs), Community Care Homes & Assisted Living Facilities	15 Dec – Maximum of two visitors at a time; these can be different people for each visit. 27 Jan – One support person/visitor for each patient/resident.	No change.	10 Feb – Two support persons/visitors for each patient/resident; Residents allowed to leave the facility for family outings.	4 Mar – Multiple visitors/support persons allowed (but only two can visit at a time).	
Retail Stores	Open at reduced capacity with physical distancing.	No change.	No change.	21 Feb – No restrictions.	
Restaurants	50% capacity; Maximum of six people per table. Buffets are prohibited.	50% capacity; Maximum of 10 people per table.	No change.	21 Feb – 75% capacity.	No restrictions.

Table 1 continued

Key Public Health Measures	Modified Alert Level 4 (4 Jan)	Modified Alert Level 3 (7 Feb)	14 Feb	21/28 Feb	14 Mar
Bars, Lounges, Bingo Halls & Cinemas	23 Dec – Closed.	Bars & Lounges – 50% capacity; Eating or drinking is only permitted while seated; No dance floors. Cinemas & Bingo Halls – Limited to 50 people or 25% capacity per room, whichever is less; No food or drink permitted.	Bars and Lounges – no change. Cinemas & Bingo Halls – 50% capacity; Food or drink is permitted provided physical distancing maintained between bubbles.	28 Feb – 75% capacity. Dance floors permitted.	No restrictions.
Schools	4 Jan – Return to virtual learning. 25 Jan – Move to in-person learning.	No change.	No change.	No change.	
Childcare Services	Can operate at full capacity.	No change.	No change.	No change.	
Personal Service Establishments, Including Spas, Esthetic Services, Hair Salons, Body Piercing, Tattooing & Tanning Salons	Open in accordance with guidelines.	No change.	No change.	No change.	No restrictions.
Border	21 Dec – Fully vaccinated: Isolation for five days; Required to take a rapid test every day for five days. Partially or unvaccinated: Isolate until receipt of a negative PCR test on day seven or later.	5 Feb – Fully vaccinated: No isolation; Mandatory rapid testing for five days. Partially or unvaccinated: No change.	No change.	28 Feb – No isolation or testing for all travellers.	

Conclusions

1. Although individual risk for severe disease was lower than with previous variants, the high number of cases caused by the Omicron variant resulted in a high number of COVID-19 associated hospitalizations and deaths.
2. The high rate of community transmission led to the closure of high-risk businesses and a large reduction in capacity limits. Mitigation of restrictions was done in a stepwise manner over a 5-week period and coincided with increased rates of booster vaccinations especially in those most vulnerable.
3. With the emergence of the Omicron variant and its high rate of transmission, eradication of the virus was no longer possible. Adherence to public health measures and high immunization rates prevented severe disease and death.
4. Projection of hospitalization rates were consistent with actual hospitalization rates, facilitating reduction of social and economic restrictions. The increase in hospitalization rate was such that it did not threaten the delivery of hospital services.