

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Taking Precautions to Stop the Spread of COVID-19 Makes for a Happy, Healthy Holiday Season**

If you plan to host a holiday party or get-together, don't invite COVID-19 over for the festivities.

With COVID-19 cases on the rise, and the arrival of the new, more transmissible Omicron variant in Ontario, the Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit is promoting "small", "safe" and "smart" as the key buzzwords for this year's holiday season.

"Celebrating the season has added meaning now after many festivities were cancelled last year due to COVID-19 concerns," says Dr. Natalie Bocking, Medical Officer of Health with the HKPR District Health Unit. "However, the reality is that we are still in a pandemic and with the new Omicron variant, we must remain vigilant to stop the spread. *Small* gatherings, *smart* planning and *safe* practices are the best ways to make the season merry and bright."

While Ontario's current limit for private indoor social gatherings is up to 25 people, the Health Unit recommends smaller-sized parties or get-togethers. "Limiting the size and frequency of contacts with others outside your household will reduce your risk of COVID-19," Dr. Bocking says.

COVID-19 vaccines help protect against the virus, which means party hosts may want to limit guests to only those who are fully vaccinated. If making this decision, the Health Unit suggests telling guests in advance about the vaccine-only rule so there are no surprises or confusion. If this isn't possible, and an indoor visit includes people from multiple households, including those who are unvaccinated, partially vaccinated, or their vaccine status is unknown, then insist people wear masks and physically distance.

"If you still aren't fully vaccinated, then roll up your sleeve and get your first or second COVID-19 vaccine dose to ensure you are protected," Dr. Bocking says. "It can give greater peace of mind when gathering with others over the holidays."

Based on current provincial guidance, if gathering indoors with a group of fully vaccinated individuals, people can consider removing masks if everyone is comfortable to do so. But Dr. Bocking says care and caution, not just consensus, should be top of mind. "Do what's right for the group," she notes, "but keep in mind that if older adults and those with compromised immune systems are attending, they can be more at risk of severe illness from COVID-19."

Outdoor gatherings are safer than indoor ones during COVID-19, but not ideal at this time of year due to the weather. If gathering indoors over the holidays, open windows and doors, when possible, to allow for improved ventilation. This might mean opening a window for 10 minutes every hour, as weather conditions allow.

Other safe practices when hosting a holiday get-together include:

- Reminding guests to stay home if they feel sick, even if symptoms are mild.
- Encouraging people to frequently wash their hands by providing all necessary supplies, including hand sanitizer, soap and water.
- Keeping a list of attendees in case the Health Unit needs this information for contact tracing.
- Cleaning and disinfecting high-touch surfaces frequently.

- Following all rules and requirements at an eatery if the visit with family and friends involves eating at a restaurant. This includes providing proof of COVID-19 vaccination.

For individuals wary of in-person visits over the holidays, the Health Unit suggests finding other meaningful ways to connect. Virtual chats, phone calls or short outdoor visits where people are well distanced from each other can be other options to consider.

“The festive season doesn’t mean a holiday from COVID-19, but we can still find ways to enjoy the season safely,” Dr. Bocking adds. “We all need to do our part in helping to reduce the number of cases in our area so we don’t see further spread and the need for public health measures.”