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GTA

Ontario's testing numbers have plummeted. There are signs that might be changing

By **Jenna Moon** Staff Reporter

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There were lines Tuesday at some COVID-19 testing centres in Toronto — a sign that dipping numbers may be on the road to recovery.

Premier Doug Ford expanded testing criteria Sunday, signalling that the province could come closer to hitting daily targets and inch toward its capacity of more than 20,000 daily tests.

The province hasn't met its testing capacity during the pandemic and, in the last week, has dropped below spikes seen earlier this month when large numbers of LTC staff and patients were being tested. On average, Ontario has done about 12,000 tests a day since it started tracking the numbers in April.

Donna Harris, a spokesperson for William Osler Health System, said Tuesday was the testing facility at Etobicoke General Hospital's busiest day since opening March 30, with 466 tests completed.

At Brampton's Peel Memorial assessment centre, 299 tests were conducted.

"Our health-care teams are doing their best to test as many people as possible daily and those who are not able to receive a test when they arrive due to the high volumes, are asked to return the following day," Harris said.

Etobicoke General was not the only testing centre that has seen an increase.

"We're certainly seeing an uptick," said Emily Hanft, director of communications at Women's College Hospital. She said that 408 people were tested Monday — the largest single-day total at the centre so far — "and we continue to be busy today."

The influx of people looking to be checked for the virus comes on the heels of an updated testing plan promised by Ford, which looks to test essential workers and those presenting only minor symptoms.

University Health Network spokesperson Daniel Girard told the Star that there has been a noticeable increase in those seeking tests since the changes were announced Sunday. On Saturday, 50 tests were completed. That number had more than doubled by Monday, when 116 tests were conducted.

Girard said there have also been spikes in tests at Toronto Western when community outbreaks are reported.

Meanwhile, Unity Health Toronto those seeking testing can expect longer wait times, said spokesperson Jennifer Stranges.

On Sunday, the testing facilities at St. Michael's Hospital and St. Joseph's Health Centre saw a collective 167 tests performed, a spokesperson confirmed to the Star.

On Monday, the facilities performed a collective 463 tests.

There's a lot to know about how Ontario approaches testing — so we've compiled everything you need to keep in mind as the province crawls through the early stages of reopening the economy.

Why it's so hard to ramp up Ontario's COVID-19 testing. We take a look behind the scenes

At its height, the province was churning out 15,800 tests on average each day throughout May, the result of what has been described as a "herculean" effort by public health and an expansion of Ontario's laboratories. The province is still pushing for more daily tests, but reporter Kate Allen takes a look at what went into expanding testing capacity.

Doug Ford promises new COVID-19 testing plan as more people come up positive

As the number of tests began to fall last week — only a quarter of the province's capacity was used May 19, rising to only half on May 21 — Ford promised to test as many people as possible while placing blame on public health for low numbers. Critics have been pushing for wider testing to accurately track the virus. Numbers have barely climbed since Ford's pledge, staying below 12,000 tests per day since the massive drop in numbers last week.

Parts of Ontario with the highest rate of COVID-19 cases aren't testing as much as places with less spread

Widespread testing is not being done in the hardest-hit regions, a study by ICES found in mid-May. Peel, Toronto and York Region ranked 15th through 17th respectively, out of 34 health units in the province. In contrast, Sudbury and other parts of the province had high per capita testing but low prevalence of the novel coronavirus.

Why Ontario's expanded COVID-19 testing will make it harder to assess the economy's reopening

The province simultaneously said it would expand testing and eased some lockdown restrictions — meaning that data is much less clear. The numbers of cases will increase, but it will likely be harder to tell how much of that increase is due to expanded testing, and what is due to relaxed restrictions. (As it stands, numbers have stayed low throughout the early stages of reopening, while new positive case numbers have hovered around 400 for the past several days.)



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