
Media Release



Timiskaming begins monitoring COVID-19 using wastewater data July 5, 2021 - For immediate release

Timiskaming now has a new way to monitor local COVID-19 levels. A wastewater surveillance program, which tests sewage for the presence of COVID-19, has begun in Kirkland Lake and Haileybury. Similar programs are currently underway in many municipalities throughout Ontario, including Thunder Bay, Kingston, Peterborough, Ottawa, and Toronto. The program is part of an over \$12 million investment through the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks to create an integrated network that tests wastewater samples taken from communities across the province.

Samples are taken from sewage system collection and then sent to the Public Health Agency of Canada's National Microbiology Laboratory in Winnipeg, Manitoba. There, they are tested for COVID-19 gene fragments, which can provide an early warning of an increase or decrease in local COVID-19 cases.

People who have COVID-19 will have COVID-19 gene fragments in their stool, even if they don't have symptoms yet or if they remain asymptomatic. That's why testing wastewater can provide good local information about COVID-19 levels. Wastewater data, along with other local COVID-19 data like case numbers and testing rates, can inform what steps are taken by the health unit to protect the public. This type of testing is anonymous since it tests the levels of the entire community at once.

Launched in late May in Timiskaming district, the program compared initial wastewater data to local case counts. This comparison established baseline levels. Now, the program is fully operational and the data is used to monitor trends in COVID cases.

"Testing wastewater can provide an early warning of a potential outbreak or increase in cases. The earlier we know of a potential increase, the earlier we can urge the public to get tested and take precautions," said Dr. Glenn Corneil, Acting Medical Officer of Health and CEO for the Timiskaming Health Unit. "We appreciate the many partners who help make this initiative possible."

This project is run through a partnership between the municipalities of Kirkland Lake and Temiskaming Shores, the Ontario Clean Water Agency, the Government of Ontario, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the Timiskaming Health Unit.

While wastewater testing is only conducted in Kirkland Lake and Haileybury at this time, other communities in the Timiskaming Health Unit area may be added at a later date.

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