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## Air Canada, WestJet, Pearson ask government to drop COVID arrival testing requirement

Canada's largest airlines and its busiest airport asked the federal government Monday to drop its rule requiring vaccinated travellers to test on arrival for COVID-19.

The airlines and airport say testing international arrivals falls to make the best use of Canada's limited testing resources, and point to the United Kingdom and Israel as examples to follow - though Israel still requires on-arrival testing of vaccinated passengers, unlike the UK.

About 1.08 per cent of fully vaccinated air travellers from abroad who were tested between Nov. 28 and Dec. 25 yielded a positive COVID-19 test result, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada.

While the positivity rate ticked up to just over two per cent in the week before Christmas, the figure falls far short of the national average positivity rate of 28 per cent highlighted by the agency Friday.

Air Canada, WestJet and Pearson want the government to revert to random arrival testing of international travellers and only require isolation for those arriving from overseas if they exhibit symptoms or test positive.

The Canadian Travel and Tourism Roundtable also urged the federal government Friday to redouble its testing capacity and return to random testing for international passengers.

"Many of those tests are being sent to other provinces for processing. And the processing time, which is supposed to have a standard delivery of three days, is exceeding that," Tourism Industry Association of Canada president Beth Poter said in phone interview.

"Travellers are looking at that and saying, 'I don't want to spend seven of my 10-day vacation in a hotel room waiting for test results.'"

Dr. Lynora Saxinger, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Alberta, stressed the value of testing as a way to monitor new variants.

"Essentially the travellers are kind of sampling the world for us. And for positive cases among travellers we would want to get genomic sequencing done," she said in a phone interview.

"If there were a new, more transmissible or in any other way worse variant, it is fairly likely that incoming travellers would be the thin edge of the wedge."

But mandatory airport testing adds little "immediate value" to preventing the spread of Omicron, Saxinger added.

Chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam said Friday that the policy will be evaluated.

"Tracking every case isn't really necessary for a surveillance perspective," she told reporters in Ottawa.

"When the whole world has Omicron, our next-door neighbour has Omicron, for the most part... we could do sampling for the tests instead of testing maybe every single vaccinated individual."

## Health Canada approves Pfizer's COVID-19 therapeutic for use in adults 18 and older, paving the way for the distribution of a potentially lifesaving drug at a time when the country's hospitals are overwhelmed.

Pfizer's Paxlovid, an oral antiviral prescribed by a doctor and administered in pill form, is designed to help the body fight off the SARS-CoV-2 virus, reduce symptoms from an infection and shorten the period of illness.

After months of clinical trials, Pfizer reported in November that Paxlovid reduced the risk of hospitalization or death by an impressive 89 per cent compared to a placebo in non-hospitalized high-risk adults with COVID-19.

The drug company's laboratory studies also indicate the drug is likely to work against the Omicron variant, now the dominant variant among new cases in Canada.

The product has been hailed as a pandemic "game changer" by some doctors because it could reduce hospitalizations and deaths among COVID-19 patients.

Experts say an effective pill that's easy to self-administer at home could relieve some of the pressure on the health care system and change the trajectory of the pandemic. Existing therapeutics approved for use in Canada - products like monoclonal antibodies and remdesivir - must be administered intravenously in a hospital setting.

Speaking at a press conference with reporters Monday, Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, said the regulator's approval is "great news" because Paxlovid could drive down severe outcomes in the current wave and beyond.

"The regulator as well as the experts helping with the guidance and the supply are all coming together at once and I think Canadians should be very happy today to hear that oral antivirals are being distributed to become available in Canada," she said.

Canada has placed an order for an initial quantity of one million treatment courses, with an option to buy up to 500,000 more. With global interest in antivirals running high as the Omicron variant wreaks havoc, Pfizer is promising to churn out 120 million courses of the treatment by year's end.

Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said 30,000 treatment courses have arrived in Canada already and will be distributed to the provinces and territories on a per-capita basis.

Duclos said another 120,000 Paxlovid treatments will arrive between now and the end of March. The federal government is working with Pfizer to bring "additional treatment courses to Canada as quickly as possible," he said.

While championing Paxlovid as a treatment that will "save lives, reduce illness and lighten the load on our health care system," Duclos said this antiviral is not a replacement for vaccines, which remain the best way to keep people out of hospital.

"This is welcome news - we have one more tool in our toolbox. But no drug, including Paxlovid, can replace

## Health Canada approves Pfizer's COVID-19 therapeutic

positive result on a rapid antigen test would also suffice.

Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious disease specialist and researcher based at Toronto General Hospital, said Health Canada's approval is "a very positive first step."

"Everything we've heard about this pill is very promising but there are clearly logistical challenges ahead," he said, adding that careful planning is required to make sure the pills get to those who need them most.

This drug regimen could be useful for people who have underlying conditions that increase the risk of hospitalization and death related to the coronavirus, such as heart disease or diabetes.

It could also be given to the unvaccinated, who are much more likely to experience severe outcomes. Tam pointed to PHAC data that suggest unvaccinated people are 19 times more likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19 than fully vaccinated people.

Health Canada has warned, however, that the product shouldn't be used while a patient is on any of a long list of other drugs, including common medications used to treat erectile dysfunction, high cholesterol and seasonal allergies, among others.

"If you're on certain medications, you have to be careful when using this drug," Tam said, urging prescribers to review contraindications before writing a script for Paxlovid.

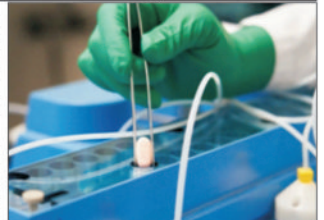
Pfizer's treatment is meant to be taken as 30 pills over five days. Patients take three pills at a time: two of Pfizer's pills and one of a low-dose HIV drug known as ritonavir, which helps Pfizer's drug remain active in the body longer.

"I am sure that the product should be used while a patient is on any of a long list of other drugs, including common medications used to treat erectile dysfunction, high cholesterol and seasonal allergies, among others."

"An important tool"

"They have to be given really early. Not easy, but everybody needs to give it a good try because it could be an important tool going forward," she said. "It could potentially blunt the severity of the virus, which is a key goal."

Health Canada said Pfizer's pills should only be used by patients who have tested positive on a SARS-CoV-2 viral test. Such tests are currently in short supply in some provinces and territories. If a PCR test is not available, Tam said a



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## Premier Doug Ford helps drivers dig out, gives people rides as massive storm hits southern Ontario

Premier Doug Ford was driving around Etobicoke Monday helping drivers who got stuck and giving people rides after a massive snowstorm hit much of southern Ontario.

The premier's office provided photos of Ford, showing him helping to free a stuck vehicle at Kipling and Eglinton avenues.

Ivana Yelich, a spokesperson for Ford, said the premier was out all morning "helping people, either giving them a lift or helping them get their car out of the side of the road."

A video posted on TikTok by user @oddykandi95 showed the premier giving a person a lift.

"This is Doug Ford!" the person recording said from inside Ford's vehicle.

"I'm a taxi driver today, a snow plow, everything else," Ford said in response.

Some social media users were quick to point out that the two were not wearing masks in the car.



Earlier Monday, Ford urged caution for those who were heading out on the roads.

"Today's winter storm in parts of Ontario is creating treacherous driving conditions in many areas," he said on Twitter.

"Stay safe and God bless each and every one of you."

The Toronto area was among the hardest-hit regions in the province from Monday's storm. Blizzard warnings were issued for much of the Greater Toronto Area.

The storm caused plenty of disruptions on roadways and prompted many school closures on what was supposed to be the first day of a return to in-person learning for all Ontario students.

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## Major blizzard slams Greater Toronto Area, closing roads and schools

Greater Toronto Area residents are being urged to limit travel as a major blizzard continues to slam the area, forcing road closures and a delay to in-person learning for students on Monday.

Earlier Monday, Environment Canada had advised that the city and its surrounding areas could get as much as 60 centimetres of snow by the end of the day.

By mid-afternoon, about 38 centimetres had fallen in downtown Toronto, along with 45 centimetres in North Etobicoke as well as Whitby. The last time Toronto saw a storm with more than 25 centimetres was in 2019. The last time there was over 30 centimetres was in 2008.

With conditions beginning to taper off, the city will likely not top its largest single-day snowfall, recorded at the Pearson Airport measuring station: 45.5 centimetres in February 1965.

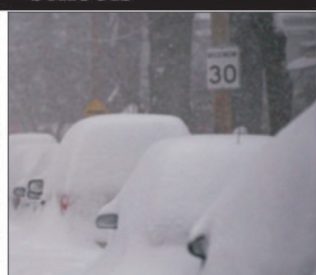
For several hours on Monday morning, the weather agency upgraded its winter-storm warning to a blizzard warning, before snowfall started to taper off around noon and the warning was downgraded.

Environment Canada said the storm could cause serious problems in dense urban areas and warned of hazardous conditions, with heavy snow and strong winds resulting in "widespread near-zero visibility."

Snow started coming down overnight, with several centimetres quickly accumulating in much of Toronto and surrounding areas. By Monday afternoon, cars and transit vehicles were getting stuck throughout the city.

"There may be a significant impact on rush-hour traffic in urban areas," the federal weather agency said earlier Monday, advising people that "rapidly accumulating snow will make travel difficult."

Shortly after 10:15 a.m., Toronto police announced the temporary closure of the Don Valley Parkway and Gardiner Expressway, two of the city's major arteries, due to the "extreme weather." Much of those roadways reopened in the early



Afternoon, though portions remained closed.

Cadillac Fairview also announced it would be closing the Eaton Centre at 4 p.m. due to inclement weather.

The blizzard is due to a low-pressure system tracking south of the Great Lakes, Environment Canada said.

Environment Canada said that, as of about 10:50 a.m., roughly 31.5 centimetres of snow had fallen at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, with about two to three more centimetres expected today.

Toronto under extreme cold weather alert

The City of Toronto has also issued an extreme cold weather alert.

Environment Canada says Toronto residents can expect a high of -6 C during the day with a wind chill of -15 in the morning and -12 in the afternoon.

The city says it is activating the following warning centres that will be open at 7 p.m.:

- 129 Peter St.
- 5800 Yonge St.

"Exhibition Place, Better Living Centre, 195 Princes Blvd.

"Scarborough Civic Centre, 150 Borough Dr.

Other parts of Ontario are expected to be hit even harder than the GTA. The heaviest snowfall is being forecast for eastern Ontario and the Niagara Peninsula, as well as parts of

"Stay off the highways as best you can until the snow stops falling," said Schmidt. "Let the plows do their work to clean the highways, then we'll get back on the roads."

The TTC is also warning its customers to expect delays on bus and streetcar routes as a result of the road conditions.

The City of Toronto has 600 snow plows, 300 sidewalk plows and 200 salt trucks working to clear the roads, according to its website.

Some boards closing schools, cancelling buses.

The snowfall has added a wrinkle to the province's already contentious school reopening plan.

Students across the province were supposed to return to school for in-person classes today after two weeks of virtual learning following the winter holidays.

The Toronto District and Toronto Catholic District school boards cancelled the planned return to in-class learning today because of the weather, but will continue to offer the option of remote learning.

Similar announcements have been made by York Region and Dufferin-Peel Catholic district school boards, along with both the public and Catholic boards in Halton, though remote learning is not being offered as an option.

Meanwhile, all Toronto Public Library branches will be closed on Monday due to the weather conditions.

Vaccine clinics shut down for the day

Vaccination clinics in Toronto, Peel and York regions were also forced to shutter as a result of the worsening weather conditions.

"With the significant snowfall continuing today, all vaccination appointments are being cancelled to ensure the safety of Toronto residents and staff," Toronto Public Health (TPH) said in a news release.

The health unit said anyone with a scheduled appointment on Monday should have received direct communication from TPH to let them know it has been cancelled.

TPH is encouraging everyone to rebook their vaccine appointments, as a result of the cancellation.

Similarly, all Peel and York Region Public Health-led COVID-19 vaccination clinics have been cancelled and health units are also asking everyone impacted to rebook their appointments.

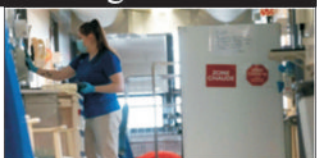
## Quebec calls on bureaucrats to work in hospitals amid staffing shortage

Quebec Premier François Legault is asking government employees to volunteer to work in hospitals, as staffing shortages continue to hamper the province's health-care system.

Bureaucrats are being asked to opt-in to work in a hospital setting as service aides, taking over non-medical tasks normally performed by nurses. That could include disinfecting surfaces and equipment, doing administrative tasks, and providing meals to patients.

"There is a storm to weather and the government is launching a call for solidarity," wrote Eric Ducharme, the secretary of Quebec's Treasury Board, in an email obtained by Radio-Canada.

The letter, which was sent to all provincial employees, said the health ministry needs to "rapidly respond to significant labour shortages across its territory," and is asking for



Volunteers are being asked to sign up to work in their managers by the end of the day Monday.

Employees assigned based on expertise

The union that represents public and para-public service workers in the province, known by its French acronym, the SPPQ, is calling on the government to focus the effort on seasonal employees, such as those who work in the province's national parks, who are currently without work.

A Health Ministry spokesperson, Marie-Hélène Émond, told CBC Monday that 500 "public service resources" were deployed to the health-care network in the spring and summer of 2021.

"The assignments offered to public service employees who come to lend a hand vary. For example, some were involved in vaccination or screening activities (clinical or administrative) and others in activities related to human resources management (e.g. processing job applications)," Émond said in an email.

She said the roles employees are assigned to varies depending on their expertise, and the length of their assignment depends on "the needs of the establishments," but that they are all temporary.

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## Roughly half of Canadians financially insecure as debt confidence hits record low: report

Canadians' confidence in their personal finances and ability to repay their debt has hit a record low, a new report suggests, with roughly half the country worried about how they will pay their next round of bills.

The latest MNP Consumer Debt Index, released Monday, has fallen to 88 points, the lowest point since the quarterly survey was launched in 2017. The Canadian inactivity firm pins the drop to the twin streams of holiday spending bills coming due and the resurgent COVID-19 pandemic.

"It is getting harder for Canadians to see the light at the end of the tunnel," said Grant Bazian, president of MNP LTD, in a statement Monday.

"Unprecedented expenses are one of the biggest contributors to household financial turmoil, and many are starting the new year being dealt another round of unexpected business closures, reduced working hours or



job loss, and COVID-related health concerns."

The survey found 55 per cent of Canadians are confident they can comfortably cover their living expenses in the coming year, down five points from their last quarter. Forty-three per cent said they are concerned about their current level of debt, up five points.

Only 27 per cent of those surveyed said they felt they could cope with life-changing events without

resorting to credit to make ends meet as their finances have been stretched thin over the course of the pandemic," said Bazian.

"With the cost of living on the rise, those households who were already overextended may feel they have to take on more debt just to afford basic necessities."

The report also found more Canadians are engaging in what MNP calls "bad financial habits," including only making minimum credit card payments (21 per cent of those surveyed, up three points from last quarter) and borrowing money they can't afford to pay back quickly (11 per cent, up one point). Nearly six in 10 Canadians said low interest rates convinced them to take on more debt, while 12 per cent pointed to sales events like Black Friday.

Potentially with those choices in mind, 45 per cent of Canadians said they regret the amount they have taken on, with 16 per cent saying their debt situation is worse than it was a year ago - up four points since September.

Bazian says that the likelihood of an approaching interest rate increase this year, or top of post-holiday and COVID-19 spending concerns, "Canadians are approaching a tipping point."

## Multi-vehicle accidents trigger road closures as winter storm pummels Quebec

With a major snowstorm continuing to batter regions across Quebec, provincial police say there have been many accidents, including pileups involving dozens of vehicles that forced Transports Quebec to close some highways on Montreal's South Shore.

Westbound lanes of Highway 20 were closed for more than two hours after two separate pileups, one near Montagne Boulevard in Boucherville and the other near the 100-kilometre marker near Belœil, according to Transports Quebec's road closures Twitter account, Quebec 511.

Highway 30 westbound was also closed in Saint-Constant at Rang Régis, after a crash involving about 20 vehicles, Quebec 511 said. The roads have now all been cleared and reopened, the service tweeted.

Quebec provincial police said several people were injured, but could

not yet say how many or how seriously, nor how many vehicles are involved. Images of the accident show cars, trucks and a coach bus in various states of damage.

The storm, which began early Monday and is expected to dump up to 35 centimetres of snow in some areas, has slowed or halted travel right across the province. With Transports Quebec reporting little to no visibility on many roads, drivers are being advised to stay off the roads whenever possible.

"We expect poor visibility conditions because of the heavy snow and winds that will cause blowing snow," said Environment Canada meteorologist Jean-Philippe Bégin. "We expect blowing snow everywhere."

Canada Post has issued a rare red service alert for the entire province. In a statement on its website, the Crown corporation said postal carriers would not be delivering mail and packages Monday, as "inclement weather and snow have made it unsafe."

dropped to -24 C in Montreal, which fell like a blistering -37 with the wind chill factor.

A balmy high of -3 C is expected for Monday.

Snow day for some kids Jackie Rosenhek said her children, Morgan and Opelia, were supposed to go back to school and daycare on Monday, but the weather had other ideas.

"So instead of destroying the house, we're going to destroy the park," she said, laughing.

Rosenhek, who lives in Montreal, said that with the kids back in class, she'd expect to get back to a normal work schedule, but didn't mind an extra day together.

"It's kind of nice to not have to manage everything all at once and just be like - yeah, it's a snow day," she said. "This whole world is crazy, so just enjoy it."

Melissa Dernaucourt, also of Montreal, said she was happy her children didn't have to try to grapple with online learning, and instead got to enjoy some time outdoors.

"We're trying to keep the little joys that we have and just... make the best of a hard situation," she said.

## Canada deploys special forces to Ukraine amid rising tensions with Russia

Canadian special forces operators have been deployed to Ukraine amid rising tensions between the NATO military alliance and Russia, Global News has learned.

The deployment of a small contingent from the Canadian Special Operations Regiment comes as diplomatic talks aimed at staving off an armed conflict in Ukraine have faltered, and an estimated 100,000 Russian troops remain camped on Ukraine's border.

Sources told Global News that the Canadian special operations presence is part of an attempt by NATO allies to deter Russian aggression in Ukraine, and to identify ways to assist the Ukrainian government.

The unit has also been tasked with helping to develop evacuation plans for Canadian diplomatic personnel in the event of a full-scale invasion, sources said.

Neither the government nor the Canadian Forces would officially confirm the special forces presence in Ukraine when contacted by Global News, other than to say special forces operators have been involved in Canada's broader assistance to Ukraine.

"The Canadian Special Operations Forces Command" is part of the broader Armed Forces' efforts to support Ukraine's Security Forces," wrote Maj. Amber Bineau, a spokesperson for special operations command, in a statement to Global News.

Bineau noted that Canadian special forces have been providing training, as well as "instructor and leadership expertise," to Ukrainian counterparts since 2020 - although sources told Global News the latest special forces contingent, which left for Ukraine around Jan. 9, is not conducting training.

Diplomatic talks between the U.S., European allies and Russia ended last week without a clear path to de-escalate tensions along the Ukraine-Russia border. Russia's deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, called the talks a "dead end."

In a statement Friday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken



said NATO and the U.S. remain committed to a diplomatic solution and urged Russia to scale back its operations on Ukraine's border. But the U.S. also warned Russia may look for a pretext to invade Ukraine should diplomatic talks falter, including engaging in "false flag" operations to precipitate a conflict.

The Kremlin has denied the U.S. accusations.

Russia has demanded a guarantee that Ukraine will not be permitted to join the NATO alliance - a demand that both U.S. and NATO officials have flatly rejected.

Canada's foreign minister, Mélanie Joly, departed Sunday for a week-long visit to Kyiv and bilateral meetings to reaffirm Ottawa's support for Ukraine's sovereignty.

"The amassing of Russian troops and equipment in and around Ukraine jeopardizes security in the entire region," Joly said in a statement.

"These aggressive actions must be deterred. Canada will work with its international partners to uphold the rules-based international order and preserve the human rights and dignity of Ukrainians."

Canada has consistently backed Kyiv in its dealings with Russia since Putin annexed Crimea in 2014. According to the Canadian government, Ottawa has committed roughly \$700 million in assistance to Ukraine since Jan. 2014, including provision of non-lethal military equipment and sending rotations of 200 Canadian Armed Forces troops every six months to train Ukrainian security forces.

The opposition Conservatives have urged Prime Minister Justin Trudeau

## Canadian study reveals rate of false positives from rapid antigen tests

TORONTO -- As provinces rely more heavily on rapid antigen tests as part of their strategy to curb the spread of COVID-19, there have been concerns over the possibility of false positive results. Canadian researchers have produced new data shedding light on the likelihood of such events.

Researchers from the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management published their peer-reviewed findings in the journal JAMA earlier this month. They looked at the results of more than 900,000 rapid antigen tests conducted over 537 workplaces in Canada between January and October 2021.

During this period, Canada had two significant waves of COVID-19 driven by the Delta variant. A total of 1,322 positive results were logged with rapid tests. Of these cases, 1,103 also had data from a PCR test to compare against.

In total, 462 rapid test results, or 0.05 per cent of the 900,000 results, resulted in false positives. This represents 42 per cent of the positive test results in the study.

Tests being administered too late in the infectious state or in an incorrect manner were some of the reasons that could explain these false positives, the researchers say.

Around 60 per cent of these false positives could also be traced back to issues stemming from one manufacturer. There were 278 false positive results from two workplaces that were all drawn from a single bad batch.

"The overall rate of false-positive results among the total rapid antigen test screens for SARS-CoV-2 was very low, consistent with other, smaller studies," the researchers wrote. "These results inform the discussion of whether rapid antigen tests will result in too many false-positives that could overwhelm PCR testing capacity in other settings."

The authors also say their findings illustrate the importance of "a comprehensive data system" to quickly identify bad batches of rapid tests.

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