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Canada prepping more aid as Ukraine war enters what former U.S. defence secretary calls 'critical' phase

Around 100 troops from Canada are deploying to Poland to help with refugee crisis

International Development Minister Harjit Sajjan says Canada is looking at more ways to help humanitarian crisis in eastern Europe as about 100 troops deploy to Poland to help with refugees fleeing war in Ukraine.

"The work that's ongoing is quite vast, but as you know, the needs are also quite vast given the atrocities that are being committed on the ground in Ukraine," said Sajjan in an interview on Rosemary Barton Live that aired Sunday.

Sajjan told CBC chief political correspondent Rosemary Barton that Canada was co-ordinating with the United Nations and humanitarian agencies such as the Red Cross to deliver additional aid and material in the form of hygiene kits, mattresses and tents.

"We're trying to move as many resources as possible," he said. "The situation - we all know how dire it is, how vast it is."

Around 100 Canadian troops are deploying to Poland to help with the crisis, and Sajjan confirmed one of their main tasks would be to help with refugee processing. Almost five million Ukrainians have fled the country since the start of the war in late February, with the majority headed to neighboring Poland.

Canada has sent both military aid



and humanitarian aid during the conflict, and Sajjan addressed the humanitarian situation.

"We have a really large medical hospital that we're ready to deploy. Turns out the full hospital is not needed, but portions of it will be," he said, noting where that infrastructure would be sent is being determined.

Sajjan said Canada was co-ordinating with humanitarian agencies to make sure aid actually gets to where it needs to be. Repeated attempts to establish humanitarian corridors into some of the most dangerous parts of the country - such as the south near the port city of Mariupol - have failed.

"The United Nations and other NGOs are putting their lives at risk to get the supplies through, because the Russians haven't been fully co-operative," Sajjan said.

In a statement released earlier in the week, the Conservative opposition criticized the government's response

to the refugee crisis, saying they have been calling for Ukrainians to have long called for visa-free travel to Canada.

"Canada should not have waited until day 50 of the war in Ukraine to bring additional resources to Eastern Europe to help our Ukrainian friends and family fleeing the conflict," said Conservative immigration critic Jaan Singh Halloran in the statement.

Ukrainians need "as many weapons as necessary," Panetta

In a separate interview, former U.S. defence secretary Leon Panetta told Barton that the war in Ukraine was now entering a "critical" third phase, where Russia is now focusing its efforts on securing territory in Ukraine's south and east after failing to take Kyiv and then embarking on a destructive campaign.

The focus, Panetta said, should still be for the United States and allies to provide Ukrainians with "as many weapons as necessary" to help them in their fight.

For the first time in two years, Canadians celebrating Easter and Passover are faced with few public health restrictions limiting their ability to gather with family and friends.

But experts are urging Canadians to take caution and do what they can to limit the spread of COVID-19.

According to Dr. Peter Juni, the outgoing scientific director of Ontario's COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, this means using more than one rapid antigen test (RAT).

"Don't trust rapid tests," he told CTV News Channel on Sunday. "We don't know yet how this works with (Ontario's) BA.2. If it's negative once, [that's] not enough."

According to a science brief released by the Ontario Science Table in February, RATs are believed to be less sensitive to the Omicron variant, particularly when compared to their ability to detect the Delta variant.

Additionally, little remains known about how these tests perform when exposed to the BA.2 sub-variant, Juni said. As a result, he recommends Canadians take two rapid tests to confirm whether or not they are infected with COVID-19 before meeting with family and friends.

"Just one test - forget it, that's not enough," Juni said. "[Take] at least two rapid tests at least 24 hours apart with no symptoms."

Anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19 is advised to not gather with others and should instead self-isolate, he said. Common symptoms include a sore throat, runny nose, a new or worsening cough, and fatigue.

Infectious disease specialist Dr. Isaac Bogoch explained that

'Don't trust rapid tests': Expert advises Canadians to test more than once before making plans



COVID-19 rapid tests are designed to determine not only whether someone has the virus, but if they are contagious at that moment. Taking more rapid tests raises the chances that any virus that exists will be detected, he said.

"If you do two tests 24 hours apart, you just increase the probability that you will detect the virus if it is indeed there," Bogoch told CTV's Your Morning on Monday. "You'll presumably have more virus in the back of your nose when you're testing, and that test will be positive."

While rapid test instructions only require users to swab their nose, Bogoch pointed to emerging data suggesting that when people swab the back of their throat and side of their cheek, in addition to their nose, this

increases the chances of detecting any virus that may be present.

According to Bogoch, it's important to remember that rapid tests are not perfect, as there have been instances where despite testing negative with an RAT, people soon discovered they actually had COVID-19.

"We've got to be honest about rapid tests, right? They were never perfect and they never should have been deemed as perfect," Bogoch said. "They're a helpful tool amongst several other tools to create a safer indoor environment."

In addition to rapid testing, Juni said those who are able to gather outdoors should do so in an effort to seek out better air circulation. Those who are gathering indoors are advised to limit the number of people in

attendance, avoid crowds, and ensure there is proper ventilation.

"You can improve the ventilation by simple things like opening windows and doors," Bogoch said. "Rapid tests are to be used with good indoor ventilation, vaccination, [and] masking."

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT OMICRON BA.2

The Omicron BA.2 sub-variant recently emerged in Canada and other countries around the world. While evidence has suggested that the Omicron BA.2 sub-variant is more transmissible than its predecessor, Omicron BA.1, it doesn't seem to cause more severe disease.

Initially, Omicron BA.2 appeared to be spreading relatively slowly in Canada. However, provinces such as Manitoba and Ontario have already

announced that the Omicron BA.2 sub-variant is the most dominant strain circulating among communities.

This comes as COVID-19 case numbers are climbing yet again across Canada, based on data compiled by CTVNews.ca. Those who have recently been infected with the virus or received their recommended vaccine doses are expected to have good protection against transmitting COVID-19 to others, Juni said. Those who have not been infected or have not had their vaccines should take extra precaution, he said.

"Quite a few people have protection through vaccination and a recent [exposure] already with BA.2, this new sub-variant," Juni said. "For all of us who haven't been infected relatively recently, we just need to be really careful that we don't transmit and that we don't get sick ourselves."

In Ontario, about five per cent of the population is currently infected with COVID-19, according to data gathered by the science table.

"When you go somewhere and socialize, it's relatively certain if the group is a bit larger, that there's at least one person in there who is infectious right now."

As a result, these recommendations go beyond the holiday weekend, Juni said. He advises the continued use of good-quality masks such as a KF94, KN95 or N95s. If none of these is accessible, Juni suggests layering a medical mask underneath a cloth mask for extra snug fit.

"All of that will help and we just need to do that a few more weeks," Juni said. "When I now see that we've reached the crest, if we are all a bit careful, this will already help."

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Ontario quietly revises its plan for hitting climate change targets

Premier Doug Ford's government has quietly revised its plan to meet Ontario's 2030 targets for cutting carbon emissions.

The new forecast for the province's greenhouse gas emissions posted to a government website shows some significant departures from the reductions earmarked in the "Made in Ontario Plan for the Environment" in 2018.

The new plan does not include any reductions from greater uptake of electric vehicles, which accounted for nearly 15 per cent of the projected cuts to CO2 emissions in the government's 2018 plan.

Also missing from the new forecast: any mention of the Ontario Carbon Trust, which the government previously touted as a significant source of emissions reductions. It was announced in 2018 as a \$400-million fund to help the private sector develop clean technologies, but never materialized.

Natural gas conservation forecast in the 2018 plan to bring about a 2.3 megatonnes (MT) reduction of CO2 emissions has been shrunk to almost

nothing in the new plan: 0.03 MT. Although the Ford government unveiled its 2018 environment plan with a splash, it did not issue a news release about its new emissions forecast. CBC News asked Environment Minister David Piccini for an interview in the days leading up to the Easter long weekend, but he was not available.

"The province remains steadfast in its commitment to meet the 2030 emissions reduction target and is confident in the plan and trajectory to get there," says the new document.

The revised forecast notes that Ontario has already achieved "greater reductions of greenhouse gas emissions than any other province or territory in Canada."

Those reductions came about almost entirely through initiatives from previous Liberal governments - most notably ending Ontario's use of coal-fired electricity generation. By the time the Ford government came to power in 2018, the province was already two-thirds of the way toward meeting that 2030 target.

The government may be helped along the way by the pandemic. Ontario's 2020 emissions showed the sharpest year-to-year drop since the 2008-09 recession knocked out the manufacturing industry: 16 MT lower than 2019, according to federal figures released this week, in large part because of drivers commuting less and travellers flying less.

Ontario's new forecast predicts it will hit its 2030 target by reducing emissions by 12 MT from current levels. Those reductions would come primarily from three sources:

"Greater renewable content in gasoline," "Stricter emissions standards for heavy industry," and "The steel industry's planned shift away from coal-fired furnaces."

Keith Stewart, senior energy strategist with Greenpeace Canada, says the vast bulk of the province's planned emissions reductions are being driven either by federal regulations or by programs that Ottawa is helping pay for.

"The Ford government is

basically coasting on previous actions taken by Ontario governments and current actions being taken by the federal government," Stewart said in an interview.

"Ontario seems to be saying, 'We will do whatever the federal government either makes us do or pays for, and nothing more.' And that is not nearly good enough in the face of a climate crisis," Stewart added.

Ontario's clean fuels mandate requires gasoline and diesel suppliers to reduce the carbon intensity of fuel. Ontario is achieving that in large part by upping the minimum ethanol content in gasoline to 15 per cent.

According to figures the Environment Ministry provided to CBC News, the "green steel" transition, funded in part by the federal and provincial governments, is forecast to bring about a 5.1 MT reduction of emissions, while the gasoline renewable content and heavy industry standards would combine for a 5.35 MT reduction.

The ministry did not provide a breakdown between those two initiatives.

The government's plan is working, said Piccini's press secretary Phillip Robinson said in an email to CBC News.

How to immigrate to Canada from Pakistan

An overview of economic class immigration for Pakistanis who want to move to Canada.

There are a number of ways to move to Canada depending on your circumstances in Pakistan.

Pakistan is one of the top source countries of new immigrants to Canada. In 2021, more than 8,400 Pakistani citizens moved to Canada, making it the tenth-largest source country overall. It is also in the top 20 source countries of international students - about 3,400 came to Canada in 2021. In 2020, Pakistan was the fourth leading country of citizenship of invited Express Entry candidates.

Further, the latest available census data indicates there are about 202,000 Canadians with Pakistani ancestry. The largest share of the Pakistani diaspora lives in Ontario, especially Toronto, Mississauga, and Milton.

On the west coast, Vancouver also has a large Pakistani community.

About every two weeks, Canada's immigration department - Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) - holds invitation rounds where Express Entry candidates are invited to apply for permanent residence. During these Express Entry draws, the top-scoring candidates receive Invitations to Apply (ITAs) and have 60 days to respond with a complete application for Canadian immigration. This is the final step before an immigration officer renders a decision on a permanent residency application through Express Entry.

Provincial Nominee Program

Another popular immigration pathway, the PNP offers pathways to permanent residency for people who can support regional labour market priorities.

The PNP allows Canadian provinces to create their own immigration programs. They may be more fine-tuned to address the needs of Canadian provinces and territories.

Almost all of Canada's provinces and territories participate in the program, except for Nunavut and Quebec. The province of Quebec instead operates its own immigration program.

There are two types of PNPs: "enhanced" programs, which are aligned with Express Entry; and "base" programs which are managed by the provinces independently.

Enhanced programs pull from the Express Entry pool of candidates. If you receive a provincial nomination through one of these PNPs, you get 600 CRS points added to your overall score. This award will push you to the top of the pool, priming you to receive an invitation to apply for permanent residence in a subsequent Express Entry draw.

Base PNPs can be an option for

people who are not eligible for Express Entry. To immigrate through a base PNP, you apply to the province, and if you are eligible, get a nomination. With your certificate in hand, you can then apply for permanent residence to the federal government.

Other federal immigration programs

Canada offers a number of other immigration programs tailored to the country's needs for labour. If you would like to immigrate to one of the four Atlantic provinces on the east coast of Canada, the Atlantic Immigration Program (AIP) might be for you. Designated employers from the provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick can hire foreign workers through the program.

Workers themselves get an individualized settlement plan into their new community.

There are also immigration options for caregivers, agro-food workers, and people who wish to immigrate to rural and northern regions in Canada.

Temporary residence options You can get temporary residence by visiting, studying, or working in Canada. Study and work experience in Canada may open the doors to more immigration options. Research has also shown that immigrants who have professional experience in Canada before immigration tend to make more money and have higher instances of employment.

Study in Canada

In order to work in Canada, you usually need a work permit. Certain people who are coming to Canada for work but not enter the labour market may be eligible to work without a work permit, but these are special circumstances.

Canadian work permits are divided into two broad programs: the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and the International Mobility Program (IMP). The main difference from the worker's perspective is that TFWP permits require a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) whereas IMP work permits do not. It is the employer's responsibility to complete the LMIA, as it shows the federal government that hiring a certain foreign worker will have a neutral or positive impact on the Canadian labour market. IMP work permits do not require LMIA as the work that the employee does through them adds a significant benefit to the country, or is part of a reciprocal agreement between Canada and another country.

After graduation, international students may be able to stay in Canada for up to three years

depending on the length of the study program and a Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP). To be eligible, international students must have studied full time in person for at least eight months. Those who studied online between the spring of 2020 and August 2022 can still use that time toward PGWP eligibility.

Student Direct Stream Students from Pakistan who wish to study in Canada may be eligible to get a study permit faster through the Student Direct Stream (SDS).

Canada aims to process all SDS study permit applications in 20 days.

To submit an application for a Canadian study permit through the SDS, you must:

provide a copy of a letter of acceptance from a Canadian Designated Learning Institution;

present a confirmation document for your upfront medical exam;

provide that you have a Guaranteed Investment Certificate (GIC) of \$10,000;

show proof that you either completed studies at a Canadian secondary school or a post-secondary institution, or

submit the application at a Visa Application Centre (VAC).

If you are approved, you will get a letter of introduction and a temporary resident visa to come to Canada. You will then present it to a visa officer upon arrival in Canada.

Pakistan citizens cannot be residing in another country at the time of applying for a study permit through the SDS program.

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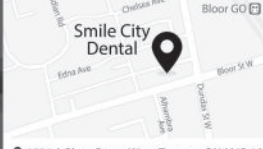
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Refugee family from Ukraine seeking to return to Canada faces immigration backlogs

TORONTO—Mina Melad Gerges Makar and his family had to leave Canada for Ukraine after his immigration application was rejected in January. But a month later, Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced the Makars to flee to Switzerland.

Now, he's hoping to return to Canada and his lawyer believes the Makars have a "strong case" to make to Canadian immigration officials, but the backlog in the immigration system remains a significant hurdle.

"I think we'll ultimately get a positive decision. I'm confident of that. We have good facts and I believe that when you have good facts, you usually get a good decision," immigration lawyer Barbara Jo Caruso told CTV News Channel on Friday.

Makar and his wife, Svetlana, first came to Canada in 2016. Although their three children were all born in Canada and are thus Canadian citizens, they were deported to Ukraine after their case to stay in the



country on humanitarian and compassionate grounds wasn't approved.

After the war broke out, the Makars made the long journey across the Polish border and then to Germany. They eventually landed in Switzerland, where they are being hosted by a Swiss family.

"The children have a right to come to Canada. Unfortunately, their parents aren't Canadian citizens and

don't have a right," Caruso said. "But they have always abided by Canadian law and that is definitely in their favor, as is the fact that they've paid taxes here. There are no criminality issues. They have English skills. They have a job waiting for them," she continued.

While Caruso is hopeful that the Makars get their case approved this month, she says there are nearly 100,000 cases ahead of theirs that are

still pending. "It's a little concerned at the time that this is taking. We've six weeks into having filed their application and although it has a layer of complexity that other applications may not have, the delay is, in my mind, still somewhat unreasonable," she said.

Adding to the backlog is the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel, granting "an unlimited" number of visas to Ukrainians temporary work and study visas for up to three years. Caruso and other immigration lawyers have been calling for measures that would speed up processing, such as issuing electronic visas for Ukrainians rather than physical consular visas.

"At 25 years doing this, I've never seen backlogs like this before. It's unprecedented and the timing couldn't have been worse for this crisis to happen when the government already had 1.8 million applications," said Caruso.

In the meantime, Makar and his family have been trying to adjust to their new life in Switzerland and trying to learn German and French.

"I just hope that I close my eyes and come back and this is finished and all the pain is gone," Makar told CTV News Channel on Friday. "We've suffered so much."

Number of people in intensive care with COVID-19 climbs above 200 for the first time in more than a month

The number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care units has climbed above 200 for the first time in more than a month.

While wastewater surveillance data is increasingly suggesting that community transmission may have plateaued at around 100,000 new cases a day, hospitalizations are considered a lagging indicator and could continue to rise in the short term.

The latest data released by the Ministry of Health on Monday suggests that there are now at least 1,301 people hospitalized with COVID-19, up approximately 19 per cent from the last week.

That includes 202 people being treated in intensive care units, nearly half of whom are breathing with the assistance of a ventilator (91).

It's the highest number of people in the ICU with COVID-19 since March 16.

It should be noted that the hospitalization data is likely an

undercount given that some hospitals typically don't report occupancy numbers every weekend.

Ontario's Science Advisory Table has said that it expects hospitalizations will continue to rise through May. They say that under their most likely scenario the number of people in hospitals with COVID-19 will peak at around 3,000, including approximately 500 in the ICU. In January, there were more than 4,000 people with COVID-19 in Ontario hospitals. The number of people in the ICU with COVID-19 peaked at 626 on Jan. 18.

"If you look at our wastewater surveillance it shows very early, early signs that (transmission) is either plateauing or going down in many parts of the province. That is obviously a very positive sign. But you want to see that trend continue before you get confident that we are working our way out of this wave," infectious disease specialist Dr. Isaac Bogoch told CP24 on Monday. "I think we always have

to be careful, you can't have a ton of confidence in the COVID era about how things are going. But at least there are some very early signs that things are starting to improve in Ontario."

Hospitalizations have been on the upswing for weeks now but are not increasing at the same rate that the province saw during the height of the fifth wave this past winter.

Back in early January when there were 266 people in intensive care with COVID-19 Ontario suspended elective surgeries and procedures for about three weeks in an effort to preserve healthcare resources.

However, Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Kieran Moore has suggested that he believes hospitals will have the resources to handle an uptick in patient volumes during this wave.

"Hospitalizations have risen pretty significantly from a few weeks ago but they are nowhere near where they were at in January and February," Bogoch told

Ontario also added another three net new deaths to its tally over the last two days after not releasing any data on Easter Sunday. The total death toll since the onset of the pandemic now stands at 12,632.

Meanwhile, the number of new cases confirmed through PCR testing over the last 48 hours was 4,669, compared to 5,882 over the same time-period last week.

Positivity rates do remain high with more than 19 per cent of all samples coming back positive over the last 48 hours.

There are also continues to be an increase in outbreaks in at least some of the settings that have access to government-funded PCR testing.

According to the latest data, there are now 182 active outbreaks in long-term care homes and 137 active outbreaks in retirement homes, compared to 137 and 103 outbreaks at this time last week.

The number of outbreaks in hospitals is also up slightly week-over-week (79 versus 74).

The numbers used in this story are from the Ontario Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Daily Epidemiological Summary. The number of cases for any city or region may differ slightly from what is reported by the province, because local units report figures at different times.

Why navigating your COVID risk is now harder than ever

Figuring out where you're most at risk of catching COVID-19 is more challenging than ever in Canada's Omicron-fueled sixth wave, and risk-and-safety strategies for avoiding infection are proving less effective in everyday life.

The rapidly spreading BA.2 subvariant has been evading all of our layers of protection - from vaccines to masks - and fuelling a surge of COVID-19 levels across Canada during a time of few restrictions. But while attempting to avoid COVID-19 risk entirely isn't realistic, abandoning strategies that have worked to lessen the impact of the virus isn't either - making this phase of the pandemic incredibly difficult to navigate.

"We have not experienced what it's like to live with this virus while we are doing this little to stop it," said Dr. Jeremy Faust, an emergency room physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital and a Harvard Medical School instructor who recently wrote about navigating risk.

"Never until now have we been in a situation in which we have the least amount of protection against infection and these variants that are just flabbergastingly contagious."

Hard to judge, hard to avoid

Faust says because everyone has a different risk threshold in day-to-day life, trying to navigate the pandemic based on your presumed best interest is a "dead end" because many people are unlikely to have judged the situation correctly.

"We might be completely correct one day and be safe and be completely incorrect the next day and be either personally at risk or putting someone else at risk," he said. "And it's this variability that makes your head spin if you stop to think about it."

Dr. Lynora Saxinger, an infectious diseases physician and associate professor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, said part of the problem with Omicron is that it punches through all our layered protections "much more effectively than anything has before."

"All of those layers still reduce your risk, it's just that the assault on the layers is a lot more aggressive right now," she said. "It's like there's a lot more shots on goal."

Saxinger said that even though Canada is vastly undercounting current case numbers there is still a "forest fire of COVID" raging across the country, with transmission



signals recently rising in Alberta, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba despite limited testing.

"The risk of infection has gone up a markedly over the past three months," said Erin Bromage, an associate biology professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, who researches infectious diseases.

"And it's getting harder for those who have avoided infection up until now to continue avoiding infection."

Playing field rapidly shifting

Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said this week that average daily case counts, test positivity rates and wastewater signals are all signalling growing transmission across the country that requires the "layering of precautions" to drive infection rates down.

"There is still a lot we can do to dampen down the current trajectory," she said during a press conference Wednesday.

"We know that using personal protective measures like masking helps reduce transmission. Likewise getting a booster dose doesn't just protect you against severe illness, it also provides a level of protection against infection."

But the effectiveness of making in preventing the transmission of Omicron and its highly contagious subvariants isn't perfect, and the protection against infection from boosters appears to be waning at a rapid pace.

Lancey Marr, a researcher on the airborne transmission of infectious diseases and a professor at Virginia Tech says that while masks have the same filtration level for any virus - our chance of infection could be higher with these more transmissible variants.

"One thing that might be different with the BA.2 is that people could be shedding more virus into the air.... You're exposed to more virus, so your chances of infection are

higher," she said. "Another thing that might be different is that the infectious dose could be lower."

Marr said there seems to be a "significant change" with masks against Omicron and its subvariants, meaning a cloth mask that may have been somewhat protective before is no longer sufficient and that higher-quality masks may be necessary.

"The masks could help blunt it a little bit, but they weren't going to stop this wave or prevent this wave from happening," said Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious diseases physician and member of Ontario's COVID-19 task force.

"I'm very much in favour of indoor masking. I'm very much aligned with the mask mandate should not have been lifted, but it would not have stopped or prevented this wave."

Additional booster doses of the vaccine are also beneficial in preventing severe disease across the population, but a large new Israeli study in the New England Journal of Medicine showed fourth-dose protection against infection waned after just four weeks.

The observational study focused solely on adults aged 60 and older and found protection against severe illness didn't wane in the six weeks after a fourth dose, but the data was too limited to determine whether a second booster provided better long-term protection.

"I'm not surprised that fourth doses aren't generating very durable protection against infection," said Dr. David Naylor, who led the federal inquiry into Canada's 2003 SARS epidemic and now co-chairs the federal government's COVID-19 Immunity Task Force.

"Two shots were much more effective against Delta. What's clearly changed is that two or even three shots won't preclude getting any of the subvariants of Omicron."

Naylor said fourth doses make sense for elderly Canadians, the immunocompromised and those with comorbidities, adding that we should be cautious with Israeli data because of the different spacing of doses there and their sole reliance on the Pfizer vaccine.

"We also have lots more people now with hybrid immunity - one, two or three shots, plus an infection in the last few months that may be increasing their level of protection," he said.

"It's a rapidly shifting playing field."

Worth delaying infection if possible

So while avoiding COVID-19 infection may not be feasible for most people, delaying it until you're as protected as possible has benefits - and there are still ways you can lessen risk.

"To try and avoid infection, people still need to avoid indoor spaces that are crowded or that create close contact," said Bromage, who wrote a viral blog post in May 2020 shared by millions explaining the places people are most at risk of COVID-19 infection.

"When in those situations, people need to wear higher quality masks than they used previously - preferably N95 or equivalent - and limit the time in those spaces. Duration matters."

Increased immunity, broader availability of COVID treatments and two years' worth of knowledge among members of the medical community are also helping to ensure that when people do get sick, they're getting the best possible care.

It's still a crisis, but the situation in Canada and abroad is steadily improving, stressed Bogoch.

"I've spoken with people in their 80s, who are triple vaccinated, who got COVID... but who are going to recover from this infection without having to come to a hospital. That's amazing," he said.

"Before the vaccines were available, many of these people would have gotten very sick, landed themselves in hospital, needed an intensive care unit and many would have died."

In Italy, one of the countries hardest hit by COVID-19 early on in the pandemic - with one of the highest global death tolls - new research suggests vaccination efforts roughly halved the number of deaths.

Vaccines prevented some 150,000 fatalities last year, the country's National Health Institute (ISS) estimated on Wednesday, as well as more than 500,000 hospitalizations and over 55,000 admissions to intensive care.

Focus on being "maximally vaccinated"

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