

# UNDERSTANDING THE HEALTH OF PEOPLE IN YORK REGION

## KEY TRENDS REPORT 2025



# Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that York Region is located on the traditional territory of many Indigenous Peoples including the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat and Métis peoples and the treaty territories of the Haudenosaunee, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and Williams Treaties First Nations. Today this area is home to many diverse Indigenous Peoples, and we recognize their history, spirituality, culture and stewardship of this land. We also acknowledge the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation as our closest First Nation community.



# Executive Summary

The Understanding the Health of People in York Region: Key Trends Report provides an overview of the health status of York Region Residents. It accompanies the launch of the [Understanding the Health of People in York Region<sup>1</sup>](#) dashboard and is designed to tell the story behind the data at a point in time.

## WHY THIS STORY MATTERS

Health is shaped by a lot of different things—from income and housing to behaviours, environments and access to care. Understanding this helps York Region Public Health and its partners plan effective services, see what's missing and take action to improve health outcomes and reduce inequities.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

 **Population growth and diversity makes York Region strong:** York Region is growing and becoming more diverse with people from many different cultures speaking different languages

 **Positive factors affecting health are embedded in our communities:** The majority of residents in York Region report overall good health as well as a strong sense of community belonging, similar to Ontario trends

 **Health status depends on income:** While the majority of residents report good overall health and a strong sense of community belonging, health inequities exist and are often tied to income and access barriers

 **Chronic disease rates, while lower than Ontario, remain our largest issue:** These are the leading cause of death particularly as the population ages

 **Mental health concerns continue to rise among all age groups:** The proportion of York Region secondary students experiencing serious psychological distress has increased over time consistent with provincial trends

 **Health behaviours represent an area of opportunity:** Physical activity, nutrition and sleep levels fall short of recommended guidelines; substance use is increasing with age among youth and non-medical opioid use is rising

 **Food insecurity is worsening:** Food insecurity has nearly doubled since 2019, affecting nearly one in five households in 2023

 **Communicable diseases look different post pandemic:** Since 2021, the number of vaccine-preventable diseases has increased dramatically—now reported to be four times higher than before

 **Climate change is worsening:** Extreme heat is a growing public health concern in York Region due to climate change, with higher rates of heat-related illness hospital visits among children, seniors and males

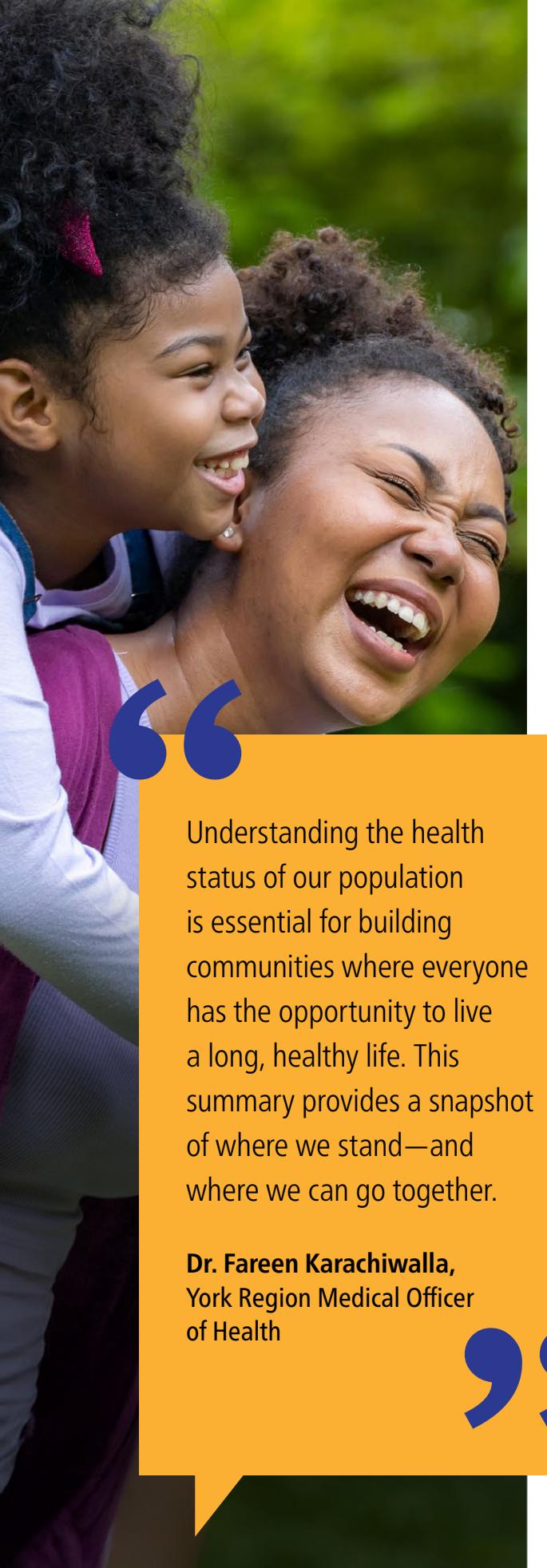
 **Upstream Action is the way forward:** Long-term health improvement requires an upstream approach—focusing on the social and environmental root causes of health, like housing, income, education and community design, rather than only on individual behaviours

## LOOKING AHEAD

York Region Public Health is committed to using data to guide decisions, advocate for change and support programs that promote health equity. This report is a call to action for all sectors to work together to create the broader conditions for health, such as healthy environments—before problems arise.



**Together, we can  
build a healthier,  
more equitable  
York Region.**



# Understanding the Health of Our Communities

York Region is a vibrant and growing community, home to 1.29 million people. Understanding the population of this community is key to improving health. To better understand the health of our population and support informed decisions that improve well-being, York Region Public Health has launched a new online population health dashboard: [Understanding the Health of People in York Region](#).<sup>1</sup>

This dashboard brings together key health indicators in one accessible place. But behind every number in these indicators is a story. This report highlights the trends, challenges and opportunities shaping the health of York Region's communities today.

## WHAT IS POPULATION HEALTH AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Population health is about the health outcomes of groups of people and the factors that influence those outcomes.<sup>2</sup> It looks beyond individual medical care to understand how social, economic, environmental and behavioural factors shape health across communities.<sup>3</sup>

For example, with a rise in rates of chronic conditions, we need to look at the bigger picture—not just personal choices—to understand causes of the increase, including whether people can afford healthy food and safe housing and whether their neighbourhoods make it easy to be physically active. These are the root causes that affect health before illness begins.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding the health status of our population is essential for building communities where everyone has the opportunity to live a long, healthy life. This summary provides a snapshot of where we stand—and where we can go together.

**Dr. Fareen Karachiwalla,**  
York Region Medical Officer of Health

Population health assessments focus on health equity—ensuring everyone has a fair chance to be healthy, especially people facing challenges because of things like money, where they live or other social factors.<sup>2</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING POPULATION HEALTH HELPS US ANSWER IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:

- How healthy are our residents overall?
- Are some groups experiencing better or worse health than others?
- What can we do to improve health and reduce inequities?

## BY UNDERSTANDING POPULATION HEALTH, WE CAN:

- Plan and deliver services that meet the needs of our diverse communities
- Identify and address health inequities
- Support policies and work with partners to promote well-being for all

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Health starts in our **homes, schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods**—



not just in hospitals and clinics.

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# York Region: A Growing and Diverse Community

York Region is changing. Over the past 10 years, the population has grown by more than 10%.<sup>4</sup> This rapid growth is accompanied by a major shift in age, with more older adults and young families shaping the Region's health needs.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly half of York Region's residents were born outside of Canada, contributing to a rich mix of cultures and languages across its urban centres, suburban neighbourhoods and rural areas.<sup>4</sup>

## WHAT SHAPES OUR HEALTH

Health is shaped by the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These conditions, known as the Social Determinants of Health, include everything from income and education to housing, employment, social support and access to health and social services. Together, they determine a community's well-being.<sup>6</sup>

Based on available data on key health indicators, York Region generally ranks among one of the healthier regions in the province.

Across Ontario, most people say their health is good, very good or excellent. In York Region, more than eight out of 10 residents say the same.<sup>7</sup> But not everyone has the same chance to be healthy. For example, people with lower incomes may struggle to afford stable housing or nutritious food. Others may face barriers due to language, discrimination or lack of access to services.<sup>6</sup>

**Health inequities** refer to worse health some people or communities experience because of unfair and avoidable social and economic conditions. These differences are caused by things like income, discrimination and access to resources. They can be changed and they shouldn't exist—because they're unfair and prevent people from living healthy lives.<sup>8</sup>



### Community-based collaboration on food insecurity

York Region Public Health partners with Community and Health Services and community organizations to take action on household food insecurity by addressing its root cause: income. One example is the Food for Change conference, which brings together advocates and residents to share strategies, strengthen collective advocacy, and explore ways to influence policy and amplify community voices.

## FOOD INSECURITY: A GROWING CONCERN IN YORK REGION

Food insecurity—defined as inadequate or insecure access to safe, nutritious and culturally preferable food due to financial constraints—is a serious and growing public health issue in York Region and Ontario.<sup>9</sup> It impacts physical health, mental well-being, child development and the ability to participate fully in society.

According to the Canadian Income Survey, 19.4% of York Region households experienced food insecurity in 2023, nearly double the 2019 rate of 11.1%.<sup>10</sup> The most recent data from 2024 suggests this upward trend continues, bringing York Region close to the provincial average for food insecurity levels.<sup>11</sup>

Despite York Region's relatively high average income, increasing housing affordability pressures are leaving less room in household budgets for essentials like food. This highlights the need for policy solutions that address the root causes of food insecurity, such as income and the sustainability of our food systems.<sup>12</sup>

Nearly  
**1 in 5**  
households in York Region experienced food insecurity in 2023.



As reported in the Nutritious Food Basket report, which is monitored by York Region Public Health.

### SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS ALSO PLAYS A ROLE

In 2021, about 70% of York Region residents aged 12 and older reported feeling a strong sense of belonging to their local community, which aligns with the provincial average.<sup>7</sup> This sense of connection is a vital factor in supporting mental and emotional well-being.<sup>13</sup>

## Youth-led social connectedness

Youth in York Region are driving change by strengthening connections in their communities. Through partnerships with local organizations, York Region Public Health supports youth-led initiatives that foster belonging and engagement—especially in areas facing greater health challenges. As one youth from Markham Youth Voice shared, "I created a lot of memories at places that I call a community with people who I love." These voices are shaping more inclusive and connected neighbourhoods.





# What the Data Tells Us About Our Health

The health of York Region's population is dynamic, showing clear strengths and areas for improvement. By looking at trends over time, we can see how health is changing and where focused efforts are needed most.

## CHRONIC CONDITIONS ARE ON THE RISE

Chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure are becoming more common, especially among older adults. These conditions impact quality of life and place pressure on healthcare services. Between 2018 and 2022, incidence rates for diabetes and hypertension among York Region residents aged 75 and older increased by 14%<sup>14</sup> and 15%<sup>15</sup>, respectively. Although rates have increased in recent years, York Region's rates for diabetes<sup>14</sup> and hypertension<sup>15</sup> have been lower than Ontario averages over the past 10 years.

**Cardiovascular disease became the leading cause of hospitalization in York Region in 2023.<sup>16</sup>** Hospitalization rates for major chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes are usually the same or lower than the Ontario average, but they are increasing over time.<sup>16</sup> These trends highlight the need for continued early prevention and management efforts.

## HEALTHY BEHAVIOURS AND LIFESTYLE FACTORS THAT SHAPE OUR WELL-BEING

Chronic diseases are shaped by a combination of social, environmental and behavioural factors.<sup>17</sup> While residents of York Region generally rank among the healthiest in the province, the trends are similar to Ontario and key public health challenges remain in lifestyle factors. Physical activity, nutrition and screen time levels are a risk factor for many chronic diseases. Many York Region residents continue to fall short of recommended guidelines.<sup>7</sup>

Through ongoing surveillance, education and community engagement, York Region Public Health plays a vital role in fostering environments that promote healthy choices and prevent illness.



Human milk can offer both infants and their breastfeeding parent health benefits, however the percentage of individuals in York Region intending to exclusively breastfeed slightly decreased between 2014 and 2023<sup>18</sup>



In 2021, only one half of adults reported at least 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity per week<sup>7</sup>



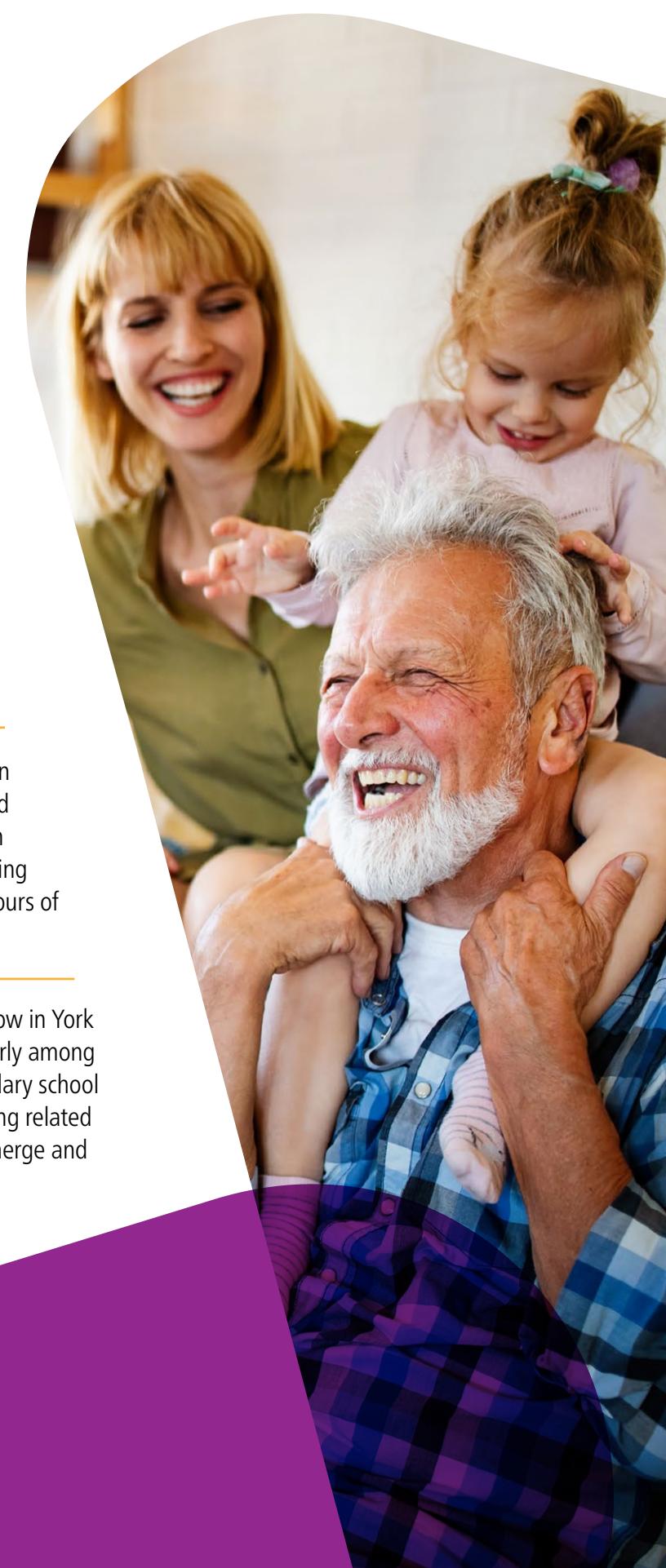
Eating vegetables and fruits supports good health, however in 2021 just 19.8% of York Region residents aged 12 and over reported eating vegetables and fruits five or more times per day—a trend that has been decreasing over time<sup>7</sup>



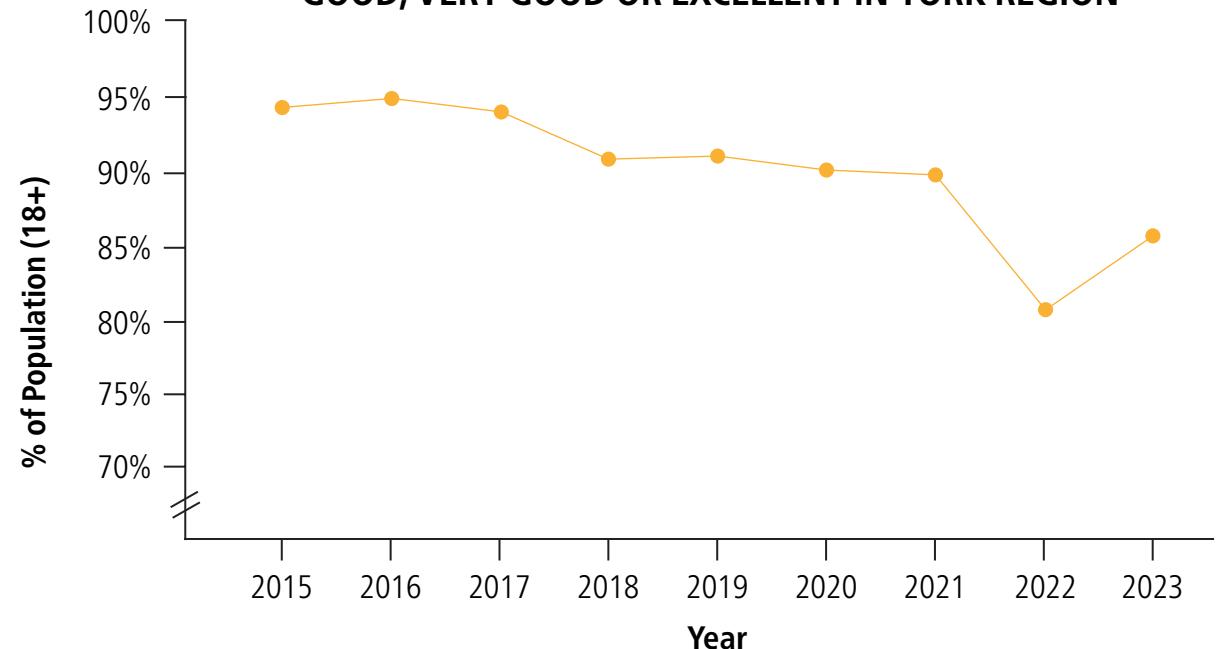
Excessive screen time, especially among children and youth, can affect sleep, physical activity and mental health; in 2023, only about one in seven York Region secondary students reported meeting the recommended guideline of less than two hours of recreational screen time per day<sup>19</sup>



While youth and adult smoking rates are very low in York Region, vaping is an ongoing concern, particularly among youth; in 2023, one in eight York Region secondary school students reported vaping in the past year; vaping related risks for youth are ongoing as new products emerge and are marketed to appeal to young people<sup>19</sup>



## POPULATION THAT RATES THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AS GOOD, VERY GOOD OR EXCELLENT IN YORK REGION



### MENTAL HEALTH IS DECLINING ACROSS ALL AGES

Mental health is declining for many people in York Region, just like in other parts of Ontario and Canada. In 2023, about 87% of adults in York Region said their mental health was good, very good or excellent. This is lower than in 2015, when about 95% said the same.<sup>7</sup>

More residents are reporting poor mental health, with feelings of stress, anxiety and isolation increasing in recent years at all stages of their lives. In 2021, one in 10 York Region adults rated their mental health as fair or poor.<sup>7</sup> Mental health-related emergency department visits are generally highest among residents aged 20 to 44, followed by those aged 19 and under.<sup>20</sup>

During or after pregnancy is a common time for people to experience mental health concerns, including depression and anxiety.<sup>21</sup> The percentage of people in York Region who experienced any mental health concerns during or after pregnancy has increased year over year from 2014 to 2023.<sup>18</sup>

In 2023, 55.4% of York Region secondary students reported experiencing moderate to serious levels of distress, including feelings of nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, depression and worthlessness, during the past four weeks.<sup>19</sup>

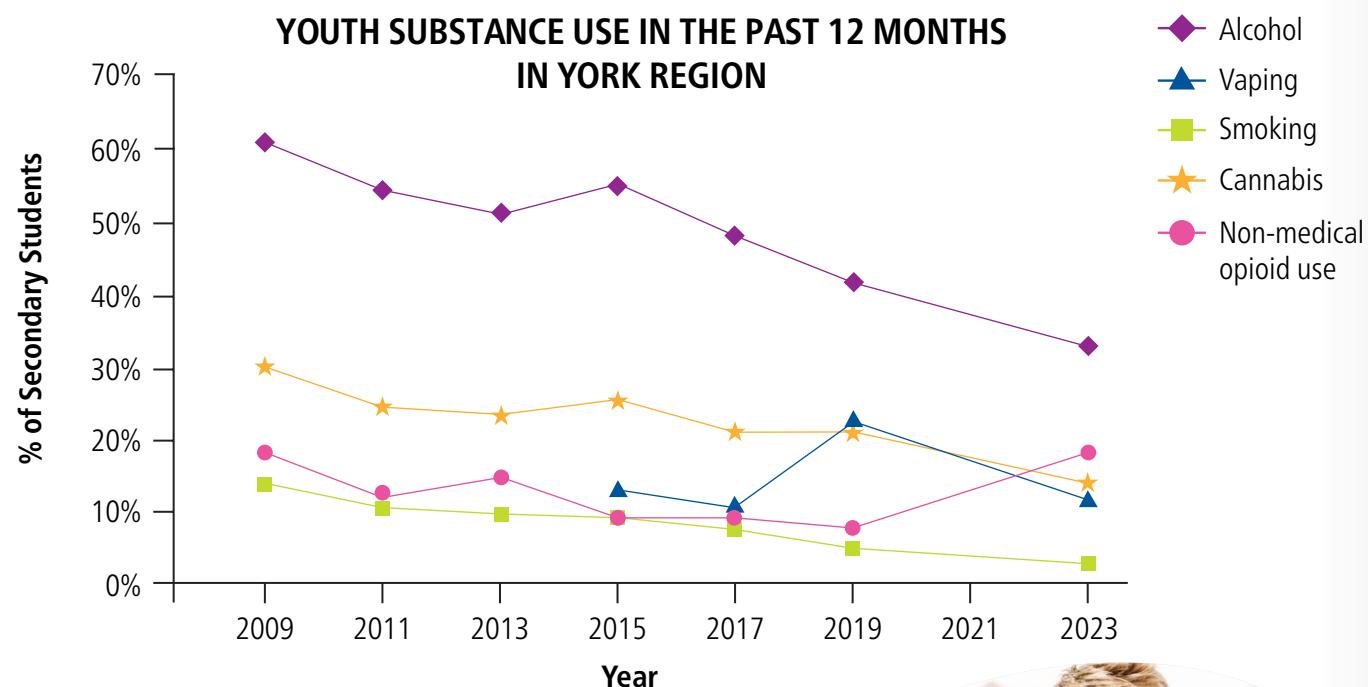
**Promoting mental well-being through social connectedness** is a key focus of York Region Public Health's supportive group-based interventions. The All Babies Count program fosters emotional support and resilience among young, pregnant and early parenting caregivers who may be experiencing challenges such as low income, limited social networks or unstable housing. By providing a safe space to share experiences, engage in facilitated discussions and participate in parenting activities, the program helps participants build meaningful peer relationships. This sense of connection and belonging can reduce feelings of isolation and contribute positively to mental health during a critical life stage.



## YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE: DECLINING, BUT STILL A CRITICAL PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERN

Ontario and York Region opioid use and related harms have increased over the past decade. For example, non-medical use of prescription opioid pain relievers by secondary students in York Region doubled from 8.6% in 2019 to 19.1% in 2023.<sup>19</sup> In addition, alcohol use is high among secondary students, with 34.6% reporting they had used alcohol in the last 12 months.<sup>19</sup> Substance use also tends to increase with each grade in secondary school; in 2023, 23.4% of Grade 9 to 10 students compared to 44.7% of Grade 11 to 12 students reported alcohol use in the past 12 months.<sup>19</sup>

Since substance use and mental health are strongly interconnected, these trends highlight the need for integrated mental health and substance use action plans.<sup>22</sup>



**The Community and Opioid Drug Response Collaborative** is a collective of community partners across the health and human services system in York Region, dedicated to reducing harms from opioids and unregulated substances in the Region. The Collaborative developed and is responsible for implementing recommendations in York Region's Opioid Action Plan. The Plan takes a comprehensive approach and focuses efforts on stigma reduction, prevention, harm reduction, treatment, first response and community safety as well as data and early warning.

# Protecting Against Communicable Diseases and Emerging Health Threats

Preventing the spread of infectious diseases, promoting immunization and responding to emerging health threats are key to protecting the health of York Region residents.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario and York Region rates of other seasonal respiratory illnesses, like influenza dropped dramatically by more than 90% between 2019 and 2021.<sup>23,24</sup> This was likely due to strong public health measures such as masking, physical distancing and reduced travel. Once those measures were lifted, these illnesses returned to normal levels; for example, influenza cases rose sharply between 2022 and 2025, reaching levels slightly above those seen before the pandemic.<sup>23,24</sup>

There has also been a sharp rise in vaccine-preventable diseases such as pertussis (whooping cough), varicella (chickenpox), invasive Haemophilus influenzae and measles. **From 2021 to 2024, vaccine-preventable disease burden increased over fourfold**, driven largely by pertussis, varicella and invasive Haemophilus influenzae and exceeding pre-pandemic levels in York Region and across Ontario.<sup>23,24</sup> Ontario's Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA) aims to protect school-aged children from serious vaccine-preventable diseases.<sup>25</sup> ISPA enforcement was paused from 2021 to 2022, resulting in lower rates of student immunization. Since then, York Region has brought rates back to pre-2021 levels through stronger application of ISPA and targeted catch-up immunization clinics.<sup>25</sup> However, since 2021, more families are choosing philosophical exemptions from ISPA, which may reflect growing vaccine hesitancy.<sup>26</sup> With rising vaccine hesitancy and increased disease activity, it's more important than ever to work with partners and community leaders to promote vaccine confidence, keep vaccination rates high and protect our communities.



York Region Public Health promotes vaccine uptake by building **vaccine confidence**—when people understand vaccines are safe, work well and are supported by science—while also addressing **vaccine hesitancy**, which refers to when people are unsure or take a long time to decide to get a vaccine, even when the vaccine is easy to access.

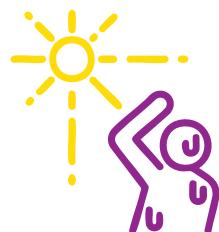
In 2025, the Vaccine Hesitancy Work Group completed a literature review on strategies to strengthen vaccine confidence, assessed indicators of vaccine trust, delivered training for vaccine nurses and developed outreach guidelines to support effective communication. The Work Group plans to continue applying evidence-based strategies to build and maintain vaccine confidence.





In 2023, about

**4.8** out of every  
**100,000**



York Region residents went to the emergency department for heat-related issues.

### **YORK REGION IS WORKING HARD TO PROTECT COMMUNITIES FROM THE HEALTH IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND EXTREME WEATHER**

Climate change continues to be an emerging issue which impacts the health of our communities. It will lead to more heat waves, severe storms, flooding and it can affect our food supply.<sup>27</sup> In York Region, extreme heat is one of the top concerns as climate change is expected to increase both the number and intensity of extreme heat days.<sup>28</sup> The heat-related emergency department visit rate among York Region residents was 4.8 per 100,000 in 2023 and averaged 5.1 per 100,000 visits over the past ten years.<sup>27</sup> While everyone can be impacted by extreme heat, certain groups are at greater risk. Research suggests children and seniors are most susceptible to the impacts of extreme heat and this is reflected in York Region emergency department visit data. In addition, York Region data shows males accounted for more heat-related emergency department visits than females.<sup>29</sup> York Region is working hard to protect communities from the health impacts of climate change and extreme weather.

York Region Public Health successfully received funding from Health Canada to undertake a project called Keeping it Cool: Increasing Resiliency of York Region Seniors to Extreme Heat. The project aims to highlight knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of seniors and their caregivers with respect to extreme heat. This will inform opportunities for adaptation to ensure seniors, caregivers, communities and local organizations are prepared and equipped to prevent heat-related illness and death among seniors.

## **Looking Ahead**

Improving population health means taking action to create the conditions for health and address the root causes of poor health before they develop.<sup>30</sup> This approach focuses on creating healthy environments and reducing risk factors at the population level.<sup>31</sup>

This Understanding the Health of People in York Region: Key Trends Report provides an overview of the health status of York Region residents. It accompanies the launch of the [Understanding the Health of People in York Region dashboard](#), which gives users easy access to explore data about the communities we serve.<sup>1</sup> The dashboard is designed to be regularly updated so information stays current and useful for making decisions and tracking programs. York Region Public Health will keep updating the dashboard and sharing key trends to help guide decisions, involve communities and measure progress over time.

While the dashboard provides the **what**, public health action requires understanding the **why**. To complement the dashboard and provide deeper context to the data, Public Health is developing two additional products; a focused report on mental health and a report dedicated to the health of older adults will aim to enhance understanding of York Region's population health by exploring underlying issues and highlighting current initiatives. These products will help unpack key narratives, examine root causes and articulate the implications for public health action.

Together, the dashboard and reports will ensure current health information is available and can be used to support decision-making and strategic planning.





“ When we understand the story behind our health, we can build a stronger York Region for everyone. ”

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