

## Tests show virus cases in health-care workers

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Six COVID-19 cases have been identified through rapid testing of health-care employees since Oct. 18.

Government mandated COVID-19 tests for unvaccinated public sector employees caught six infections among health-care workers in the first two weeks of the province's screening program.

Since the public health order requiring tests for unvaccinated front-line public sector workers came into force on Oct. 18, six health-care staff had a positive rapid test result, which was later confirmed using a PCR test, a spokesman for Shared Health said.

Three positive results came from the Prairie Mountain Health Region, two from Southern Health, and one from Winnipeg.

There are currently 1,851 direct-care workers who have disclosed they are not fully vaccinated and require a negative test result within 48 hours of beginning each of their shifts.

Dr. Samir Sinha, the director of geriatrics at Sinai Health System in Toronto, said while the number of infections found so far is low, it does reinforce the need for health-care workers to be immunized.

"Right now, they're doing rapid antigen testing as a line of defence, but really it's a pragmatic second best approach to the best possible thing we can do to support vulnerable people — given that hundreds have died in Manitoba alone — which is making sure everyone is vaccinated," Sinha said Tuesday in an interview with the *Free Press*.

While data from surveillance testing can tell public health officials more about how the virus is spreading in a community and whether extra precautions such as daily testing should be taken, Sinha said it's not a suitable alternative to immunization.

Staff are not tested daily and can potentially become infected and spread the virus to patients, residents and vulnerable people in the 48 hours between tests, he added.

Sinha pointed to Quebec as a province that has chosen to follow the best available evidence and mandate vaccinations for health-care workers.

"After everything that Manitoba has been through, after close to 500 people died in personal care homes, you would think that at this point we would do everything possible to prevent another unnecessary death," Sinha said.

Meanwhile, the number of tests that came back positive among staff employed at schools, daycares, correction facilities and child and family services agencies remained under wraps Tuesday, as the province declined to say if it is keeping tabs on such data.

The *Free Press* requested the number of positive test results found through rapid testing of asymptomatic, unvaccinated employees in education, child care, corrections and child and family services since Oct. 18.

Thousands of employees across those sectors, including about 11 per cent of people working in education, must show a recent negative COVID-19 test result before heading to work.

In a brief statement Tuesday, a spokesman for the province said the number of rapid tests that came back positive as part of the provincially mandated screening program could not be shared.

"Individual test results are not tracked as it may potentially violate personal health information," the spokesman said, adding that a public health investigation is launched following a confirmatory PCR test.

Followup questions on how public health is monitoring the testing program, and whether the province is compiling data on positive rapid test results, were not addressed by the government on Tuesday.

Sinha said as long as Manitoba continues to offer testing as an alternative to vaccination, it needs to analyze how the screening program is performing.

"Someone better be looking at the data," Sinha said. "Someone has decided to potentially compromise the health of all these individuals, put them at greater risk, by allowing unvaccinated workers to potentially put vulnerable individuals at risk.

"If they're not monitoring their own surveillance data, how do they know their decision not to do the thing that would best protect their own residents or other vulnerable populations is even working?" he said.

As of Monday, 34,105 health-care staff were confirmed as fully vaccinated, Shared Health said.

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