



COMMUNITY REPORT 2024



PublicHealth
WELLINGTON-DUFFERIN-GUELPH
Stay Well.

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Dr. Nicola Mercer,

Medical Officer of Health and CEO



As I look to the future of public health, I am struck by not just the amount of change, but also the increasing rate at which we see change occurring. This past year was one of great growth and innovation at Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health. While we continue to deliver excellent service that protects the health of our region, we are also keeping one eye firmly fixed on the future. As Medical Officer of Health and CEO, it is my pleasure to introduce the **2024 Community Report**. It is impossible to capture the full depth and breadth of everything our team at WDG Public Health accomplished in the past year, but this report highlights key initiatives, developments and activities that had a direct impact on the health of our region.

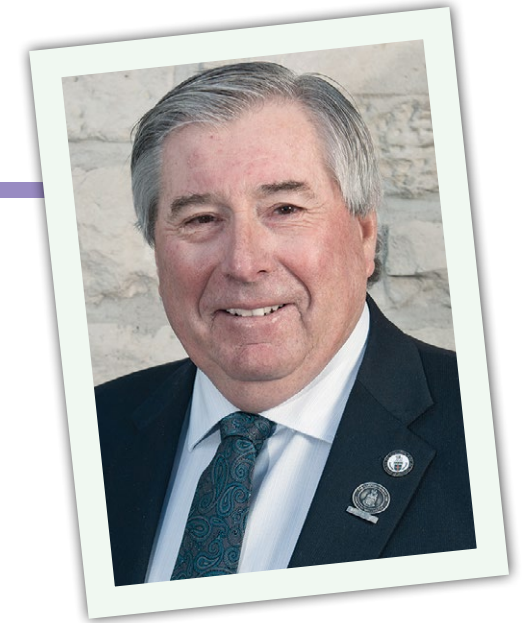
In 2024, the Agency continued our leadership in harnessing forward-facing technologies to deliver public health outcomes. The integration of Artificial Intelligence and emerging technologies into some of our services is an excellent example of this approach. From our AI-powered chatbot on our website to transforming the way we create letters for students under the *Immunization of School Pupils Act*, AI is a tool that is helping to streamline our work in ways that allow the team at Public Health to focus their time and energy on supporting residents and partners throughout WDG.

Looking ahead, we will continue to embrace technology—wisely and responsibly—to ensure that WDG Public Health delivers on our promise of people-centred public health services. We are at the beginning of this journey and not the end, but I am excited to see our continued innovation on your behalf. Thank you for your continued support and trust as all of us work toward a healthy and thriving region.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N Mercer', written in a cursive style.

George Bridge,

Chair of the Board of Health



Each year, as the Chair of the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health Board of Health, I have the opportunity to introduce the Agency's Community Report to you, my fellow residents of the region. This year's report presents a brief snapshot of the many projects and activities carried out by WDG Public Health to support the health of our region. In 2024, the Agency continued on its path toward the future, integrating new and exciting tools into its toolkit.

Technology continues to be an important word at WDG Public Health. This past year, the Agency has delved deeper into the world of AI, looking for ways to use it to reduce cost, while freeing up resources to do the work of public health. Many of these innovative projects are in their infancy and I look forward to seeing them bear fruit in the coming years.

On behalf of the Board of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, I encourage you to read on to see the excellent work conducted on all our behalf. Working with Dr. Mercer, her senior leadership team and all the staff at Public Health, we look forward to continuing to serve you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'George Bridge'.

Board of Health **Members**

Representing Wellington County

David Anderson, Councillor, County of Wellington
George Bridge (Chair), Citizen Appointee
Dr. Duncan Bull, Provincial Appointee
Campbell Cork, Councillor, County of Wellington
Chris White (Secretary-Treasurer), Warden, County of Wellington;
Mayor, Township of Guelph-Eramosa

Representing Dufferin County

Steve Cavell, Provincial Appointee
Guy Gardhouse, Councillor, County of Dufferin;
Mayor, Township of East Garafraxa
Ralph Manktelow, Councillor, County of Dufferin
Sandra Starr, Provincial Appointee

Representing City of Guelph

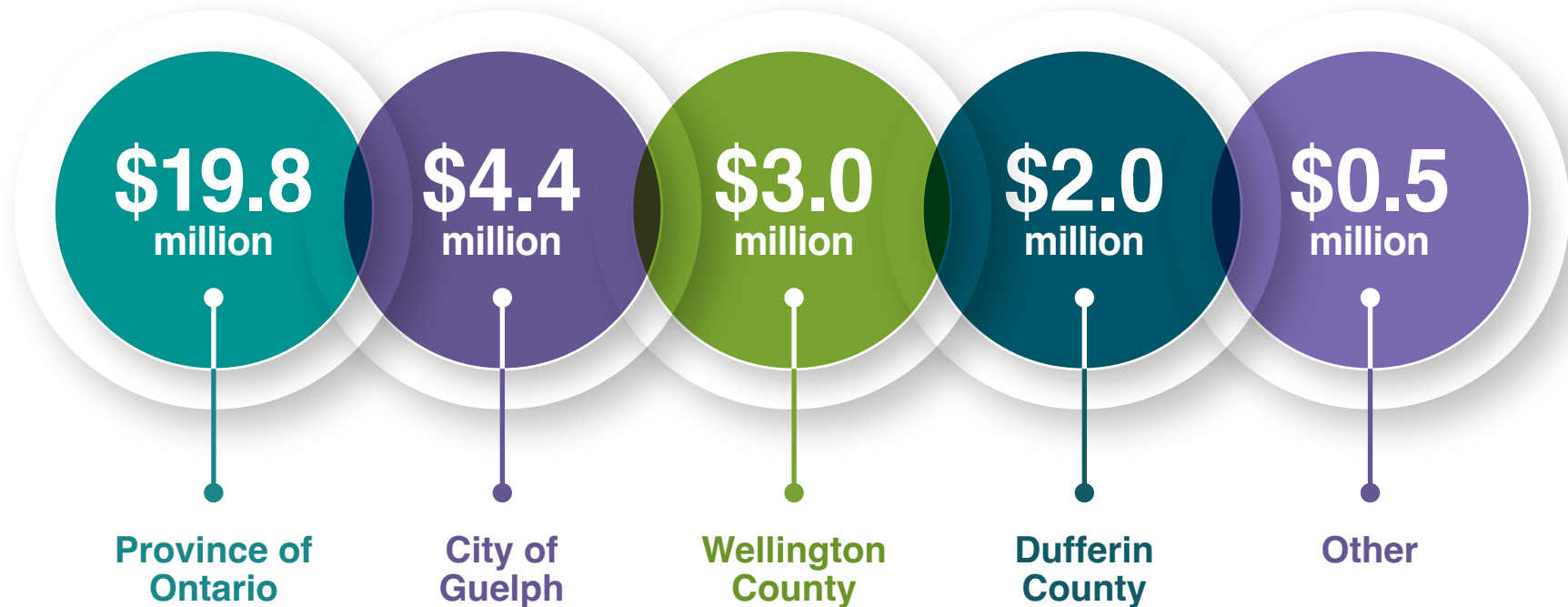
Linda Busuttil (Vice-Chair), Councillor, City of Guelph
Erin Caton, Councillor, City of Guelph
Rodrigo Goller, Councillor, City of Guelph

Representing WDG Public Health

Dr. Nicola Mercer (Ex-Officio Member),
WDG Public Health, Medical Officer of Health & CEO



Financials



The 2024 total operating revenue for WDG Public Health was \$29.8M. WDG Public Health receives funding from multiple sources:

- The Province of Ontario provides funding through the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS). In 2024, the Ministry of Health provided funding for 60% of the Agency's revenues and MCCSS provided 6%.
- The municipalities of Wellington, Dufferin and Guelph provide funding based on the population of each municipality relative to the total population of the region. Population numbers are determined by the most recent census. In 2024, Wellington County contributed 10% of the Agency's revenues, Dufferin County contributed 7% and the City of Guelph contributed 15%.
- Occasionally, WDG Public Health receives one-time funding for special projects.

As a publicly funded organization, WDG Public Health reports its finances in accordance with the public sector accounting standards. Financial statements are subject to an audit by an external audit firm as outlined in the Municipal Act. The full audited financial statements for the year can be found at wdgpublichealth.ca.

Children's Health Services

The early years are critical for lifelong health and well-being. Children's Health Services (CHS) supports families from pregnancy until children start school, offering home visits, parenting guidance and connections to essential services.

WDG Public Health partners with hospitals, midwives, doctors, and early childhood programs to ensure families get support by providing a strong foundation for children's health and well-being. WDG Public Health is committed to expanding access and improving delivery as the community's needs in this area continue to grow.

The goal of the CHS program is to promote positive lifelong outcomes through early intervention and support in a child's life. Early experiences are critical in shaping adulthood. Mitigating the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are potentially traumatic events occurring before age 18, can significantly reduce the risk of negative health outcomes later in life. Stable, nurturing relationships with parents and caregivers are key protective factors that help children develop strong coping skills and reduce the risk of ACEs.

The CHS team focuses on improving parenting capacity by supporting the development of healthy, secure attachments and stable relationships. Using a strengths-based approach, the team works collaboratively with families to develop skills and achieve mutually-agreed-upon goals within family service plans. All CHS staff have completed training on ACEs and understand the importance of early intervention.



Reducing Barriers to Dental Care

The Canadian Dental Care Plan

The Canadian Dental Care Program (CDCP), launched in December 2023, is helping more Canadians access the dental care they need. The CDCP covers a portion of dental treatment costs for qualifying families. Initially available to seniors aged 65 and over, adults with disabilities, and children under 18, the program will expand in May 2025 to include all adults aged 18 to 64. This promises to further reduce pressure on emergency services, promote preventive care, and improve oral health outcomes for Canadians of all ages.

Locally, WDG Public Health supported 801 seniors with preventive care—such as cleanings and check-ups—and provided 1,348 dental procedures, including fillings, extractions, and root canals. Thanks to the CDCP, waitlists have shrunk dramatically, with only 21 seniors waiting for exams in Guelph and just four in Orangeville by the end of the year.

Eligible individuals can benefit from both the CDCP and Healthy Smiles Ontario (HSO) programs. This dual eligibility allows for better coverage, flexibility, and more timely care—especially for those who might otherwise face barriers to treatment. Coordinating these programs ensures that clients receive the right services at the right time, without unnecessary delays or duplication.



Healthy Smiles Ontario

For children, the Healthy Smiles Ontario (HSO) program provided dental screenings to **529 children**, along with **1,114 cleanings**, and assisted **386 children** with urgent care in 2024.

Health Protection

WDG Public Health ensures community health and safety through inspections, investigations and enforcement of public health standards. In 2024, the Agency achieved full compliance with the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS) and maintained transparency by making inspection and complaint reports publicly available.

Key achievements included:



Recreational water safety – **275** pools, spas and splash pads inspected.



Drinking water protection – **73** adverse water quality incidents and **10** boil water advisories investigated.



Reducing youth access to harmful products – **369** tobacco and **151** vape retailer inspections.



Food safety – **2,939** restaurant and food vendor inspections to prevent foodborne illness.



Safe environments – **65** seasonal farm worker housing inspections and nine recreational camp inspections.



Infection prevention and control (IPAC) – **1,108** reportable disease cases and **197** long-term care home and retirement home outbreaks investigated.



Vector-borne disease prevention – **208** ticks tested for Lyme disease and **105,108** catch basins treated for West Nile Virus.



Rabies prevention – **1,077** animal exposures investigated and administered the rabies vaccine as a preventative measure to **92** individuals.

These initiatives prevent illness, reduce outbreaks, and promote safer communities. WDG Public Health remains committed to strengthening public health protections, improving compliance and enhancing transparency through inspections, partnerships, and proactive interventions in 2024 and beyond.

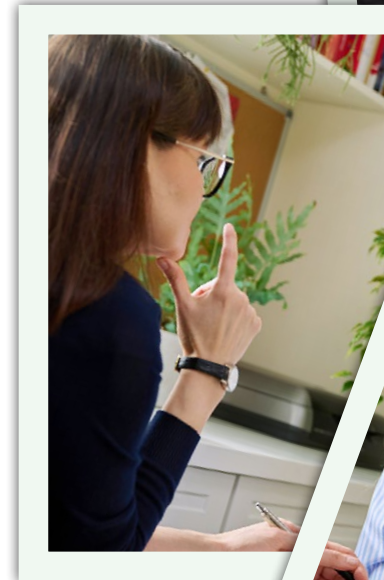
Protecting our Community Through Harm Reduction

Substance use remains a pressing public health issue and harm reduction strategies play a critical role in minimizing associated health risks. WDG Public Health works with partners throughout the community to prevent infections, reduce overdose deaths and connect individuals to essential health services.

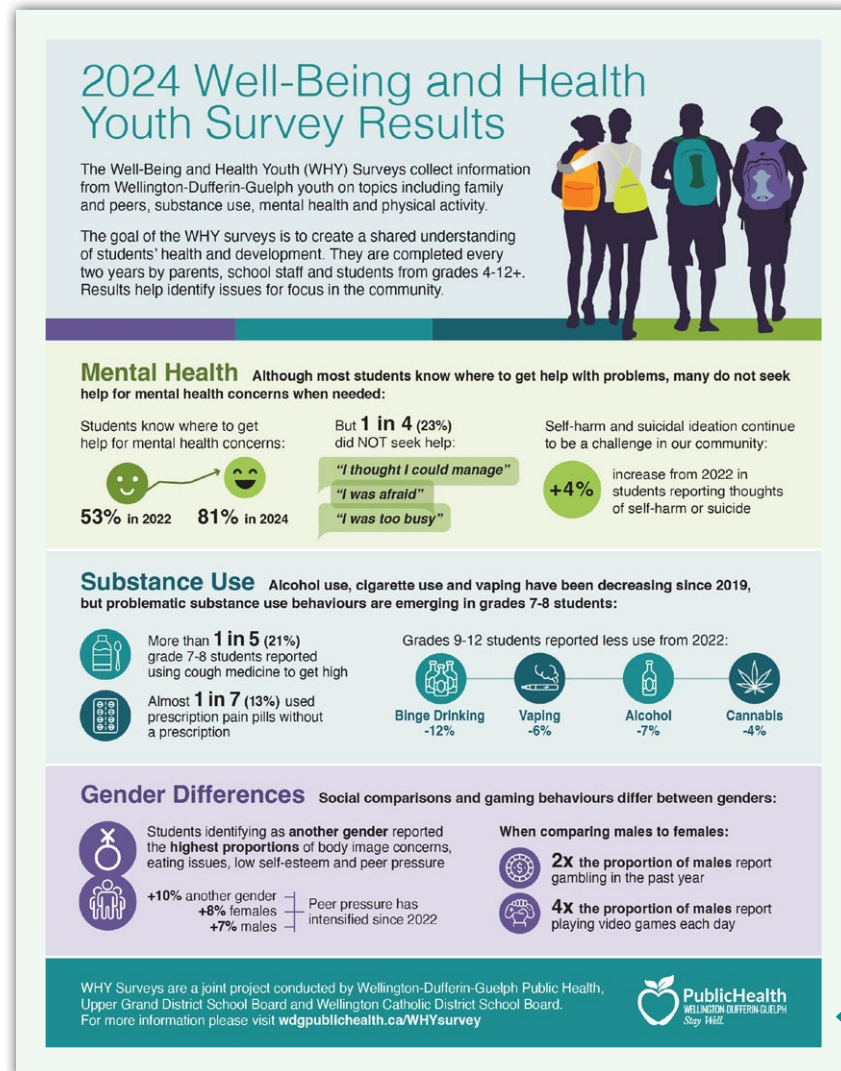
By promoting safe practices and reducing stigma, WDG Public Health helps individuals engage with healthcare and recovery services. Highlights of our efforts:

- **Client-Centered Harm Reduction:** The program prioritizes non-judgmental, evidence-based approaches, providing clean supplies to prevent infections like HIV and Hepatitis C.
- **Naloxone Distribution:** WDG Public Health continues to distribute Naloxone, a life-saving opioid overdose reversal drug.
- **Community Partnerships:** WDG Public Health collaborates with several local agencies to ensure widespread access to harm reduction supplies, sexual health services, and immunizations.
- **Safe Disposal:** WDG Public Health worked with the City of Guelph and other municipal partners to provide information on how to dispose of needles found on private or public property including the placement of community sharps bins at various locations, including at all WDG Public Health offices. Needle drop boxes are placed in the community to help ensure safe disposal.
- **Community Engagement:** Outreach at events like Pride, Hepatitis Awareness Day, and Overdose Awareness Day raises awareness and reduces stigma. Drop-in clinics further support individuals in need.

WDG Public Health remains committed to expanding harm reduction efforts, strengthening community partnerships and increasing awareness to support individuals who use substances. Through these initiatives the program continues to advance health equity and improve outcomes across the WDG region.



Surveying the Health and Well-being of Local Youth



The Well-Being and Health Youth (WHY) Surveys collect information from students, parents and school staff across Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) to assess the health and well-being of youth in the region. These surveys provide valuable insights into the challenges and needs of youth and help guide the creation of support programs and interventions.

In 2024, over 24,000 responses were collected, mostly from students in Grade 4 and above. However, fewer parents and staff responded compared to previous years.

Key Findings:

- **Mental Health:** Many students report feeling better now compared to during the COVID-19 pandemic, with an increased awareness of where to seek help when needed.
- **Substance Use:** While substance use remains prevalent amongst youth, there has been a decline in the use of substances such as alcohol and vaping among students compared to previous years.
- **Gender Differences:** Female students generally reported more issues than male students. Students who do not identify strictly as male or female report facing greater challenges.
- **New Topics:** The 2024 survey introduced questions about discrimination, resilience and the impact of the pandemic. Many students noted experiences of discrimination and the pandemic's negative impact on their mental health.

[View the Infographic](#)

Keeping Our Community Healthy:

Clinical Services

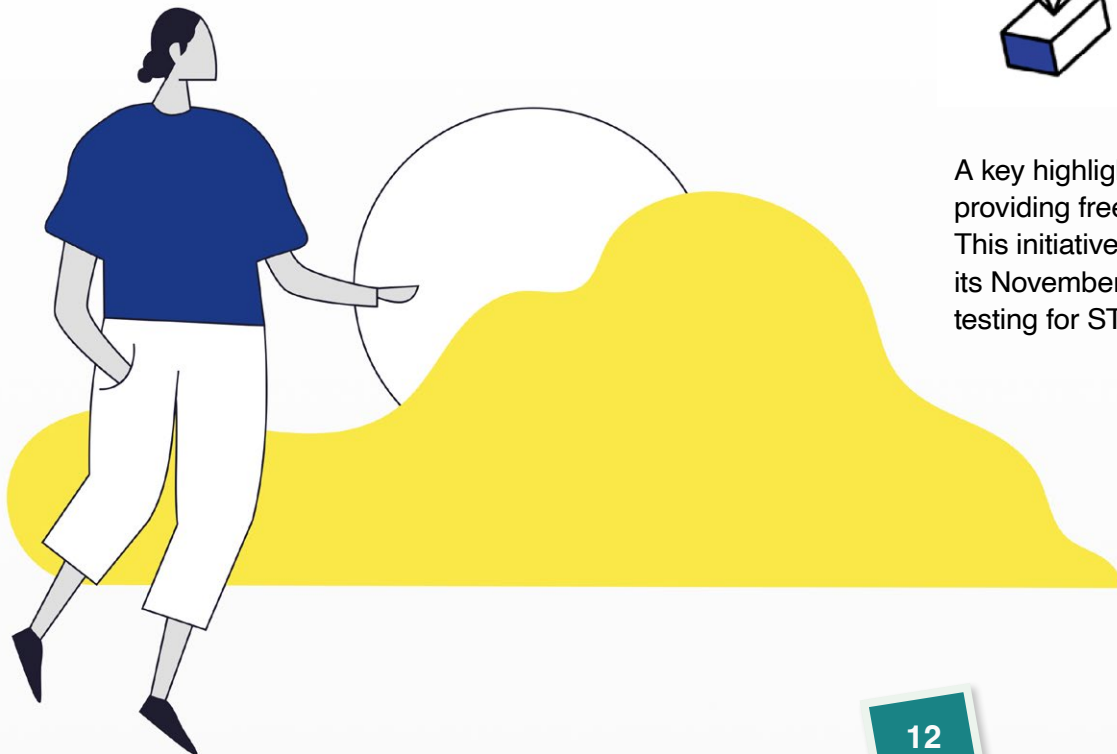
WDG Public Health Clinical Services leads the way in the prevention and treatment of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) such as hepatitis C, gonorrhea and syphilis, while introducing innovative programs to improve access to healthcare. In 2024, there were 36 reported cases of hepatitis C, a slight decrease from the previous year, with the region's rate remaining lower than the Ontario average. Gonorrhea cases remained stable with 119 cases, and syphilis saw a small increase in both infectious and non-infectious cases. Tuberculosis (TB) treatment continued, with six active TB cases fully treated, and 65 latent TB cases managed.

WDG Public Health remains committed to providing accessible services and education to ensure the health and well-being of residents in Wellington, Dufferin and Guelph. Through continued support and innovation, the Clinical Services team will keep working to reduce the spread of infections and improve public health outcomes in the community.



GetaKit.ca

A key highlight for 2024 was the launch of the GetAKit program, providing free at-home STI testing kits for individuals over age 16. This initiative screening program saw 28 people participate since its November launch, enhancing access to private and convenient testing for STIs.



Data & Analytics Innovation in Public Health

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health is using innovative data and analytics strategies to improve health outcomes, streamline operations and enhance service delivery.

Harnessing data and analytics enables WDG Public Health to make evidence-supported decisions, improve efficiency and enhance public health interventions. From streamlining immunization notifications to leveraging AI and open-source technology, these innovations are strengthening our ability to protect and promote community health.

Key Innovations include:

- **Clearer Immunization Notices:** A new, flexible tool for Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA) vaccination notices improves clarity and reduces potential miscommunication.
- **Stronger Data Governance:** A structured data inventory is enhancing decision-making and can be shared with external partners.
- **AI-Driven Solutions:** The utilization of AI is enabling automation, machine learning applications, and stronger security measures.
- **Open-Source Public Health Projects:** Initiatives like wastewater surveillance and well water testing are improving transparency and collaboration.
- **Improved Public Engagement:** A newly launched AI powered chatbot on the WDGPB website is improving accessibility and client support to get people the information they need faster.

WDG Public Health's commitment to data-driven innovation supports its mission to improve health outcomes, foster collaboration and build a sustainable public health system. By embracing technology, the agency is setting a strong foundation for the future of public health.



Reducing the Impact of Ticks and Mosquitoes

Rising temperatures and extended warm seasons are driving the growth of tick and mosquito populations and pushing them into new areas. In 2024, 208 tick submissions were received, with 95 identified as blacklegged ticks, the primary cause for the spread of Lyme disease. There were 22 reported cases of Lyme disease in humans, showing a continuing rise in incidence.

Four mosquito pools tested positive for West Nile Virus (WNV) in 2024, with one human case reported. Warmer, wetter weather conditions are expected to further increase mosquito populations.



Program Enhancements:

- **Tick Surveillance Innovations:** WDG Public Health launched an online tick submission process to streamline data collection. Blacklegged tick submissions via the Online Tick Identification tool increased 13% in 2024.
- **Mosquito Surveillance Innovations:** In collaboration with Conestoga College, WDG Public Health will pilot environmental DNA (eDNA) sampling in 2025 to monitor mosquito populations and emerging diseases.
- **Public Education:** WDG Public Health continues efforts to educate the public through social media campaigns, resource distribution, and partnerships with local organizations.
- **Community Engagement:** Nearly 100 tick awareness signs were installed in local parks and trails. In 2025, WDG Public Health will partner with school boards to enhance vector-borne disease education.
- **One Health Approach:** WDG Public Health will continue tick identification workshops in collaboration with national and academic partners.

Climate change is expanding the reach of ticks and mosquitoes thereby increasing the risk of Lyme disease and West Nile Virus (vector-borne diseases). Effective surveillance and public education, along with the use of innovative technologies, will remain crucial to managing these risks and protecting public health.

Trends in Diseases of Public Health Significance

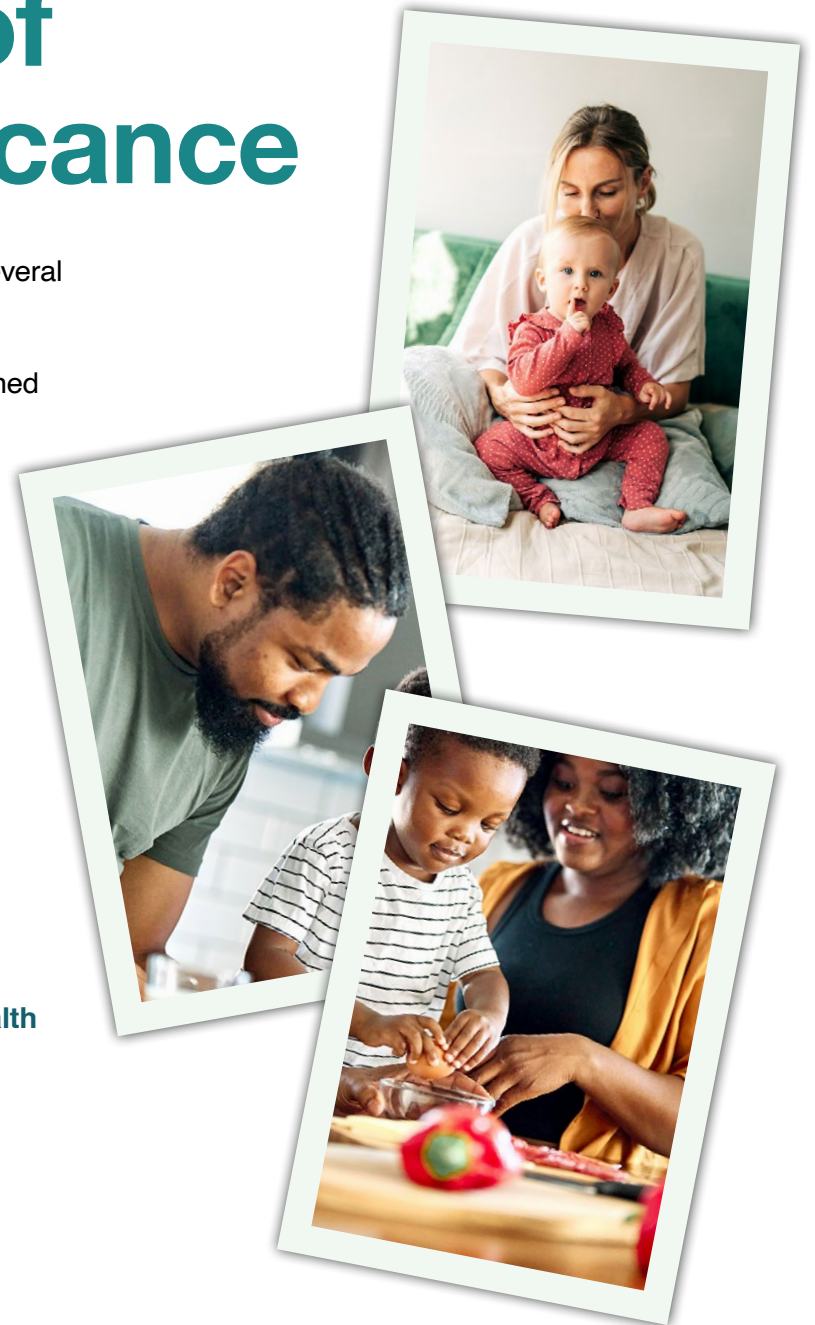
In 2024, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health identified significant trends in several infectious diseases, prompting targeted interventions to protect community health.

Salmonella cases underscored the importance of food safety, leading to strengthened outbreak monitoring and public awareness campaigns on proper food handling. Similarly, Giardia, a waterborne parasite, prompted improved water quality initiatives and partnerships with municipalities to ensure safe drinking water.

Pertussis (whooping cough) saw an increase, posing a risk to infants and young children. In response, intensified vaccination efforts, special clinics and educational outreach reinforced the importance of immunization. Shigella outbreaks, primarily affecting vulnerable populations, led to targeted interventions emphasizing hygiene and safe food handling practices.

Recognizing the role of social determinants of health, WDG Public Health implemented a trauma-informed approach and professional translation services to ensure equitable access to information and care. Disease monitoring remains a top priority, with strong community partnerships playing a vital role in managing and mitigating infectious disease risks.

Through ongoing surveillance, education, and intervention, WDG Public Health is committed to fostering a healthier and safer community for all residents.



Spotlight on Avian Flu

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) remains a critical public health and agricultural concern, with confirmed cases in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) in 2022 and 2023. While the risk to humans is low, continued vigilance, surveillance and interagency collaboration are essential to protecting both animal and human health.

Public Health and Agricultural Impact

Avian flu, or bird flu, is a highly contagious virus affecting birds with the potential to infect humans and other animals. Outbreaks have led to significant economic losses including culling millions of birds and disrupting food supply chains. WDG was Ontario's first region to detect avian influenza in domestic birds, underscoring the importance of early detection and rapid response.

A Multi-Agency Approach

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health collaborates with federal, provincial and local partners—including the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Agribusiness (OMAFRA)—to manage outbreaks.

Key strategies include:

**Enhanced surveillance
of poultry populations**

**Biosecurity measures
to limit spread**

**Targeted vaccine clinics
for high-risk workers**

**Public and professional
education to support
prevention and
containment**

Strengthening Future Preparedness

WDG Public Health continues to expand outreach to small flock owners, improve access to personal protective equipment and enhance pandemic preparedness planning. Inter-agency coordination and proactive risk management remain the foundation of mitigating future outbreaks and safeguarding public health.

Food Affordability:

Making Sure Everyone Has Enough to Eat

In 2024, WDG Public Health used the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) to track food costs in the community. Last year, a family of four needed \$315.47 per week for healthy groceries—slightly less than in 2023. However, food insecurity remains high, affecting 23% of local households and over 30% of children in Ontario.

A major challenge is housing costs, which can consume 35% to 131% of income for low-income families, leaving little for food or other essentials. Many working individuals still rely on food security programs such as food banks, with visits rising 38% in Ontario from 2022 to 2023.

Public Health is working with community partners to raise awareness and advocate for solutions like fair wages, improved social assistance and job stability. Addressing food insecurity requires long-term policy changes including discussions on providing a basic income and affordable housing.

WDG Public Health remains committed to supporting families and working towards a future where no one worries about their next meal.



Coping with Food Insecurity

Food insecure households often cope through strategies that manage income and many also resort to strategies that manage food.

For example, parents have cut back on their own food intake to feed their children, or will rely on school-based food support programs. Other strategies households use to make income go further include using coupons, returning bottles, postponing bill payments, borrowing money, borrowing food, selling possessions, and buying food on credit. Many households also consume cheaper foods, skip meals or eat less.

Canadian research revealed that food insecure university students have used coping strategies such as applying for a loan or bursary, seeking employment, working more hours and purchasing food using a credit card.

In addition, housing affordability can lead to undesirable sharing and crowding. Individuals' overall quality of life and mental health have been shown to be negatively impacted by insecure renting arrangements.

Fighting Cancer with the HPV Vaccine

HPV vaccination is a critical public health tool in preventing cervical, oropharyngeal and other anogenital cancers in both males and females. Currently, 77% of 17-year-olds and 50% of 12-year-olds in WDG have received the HPV vaccine. While this is above the provincial average, it is still below the 90% target set by the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer (CPAC). To boost coverage, WDG Public Health operates over 100 school-based clinics, in addition to offering vaccinations at public health offices and through primary care providers.



77% of 17-year-olds and
50% of 12-year olds in WDG have received the HPV vaccine

To ensure widespread awareness and uptake, WDG Public Health employs robust communication strategies including letters, emails, texts, robocalls and social media campaigns.

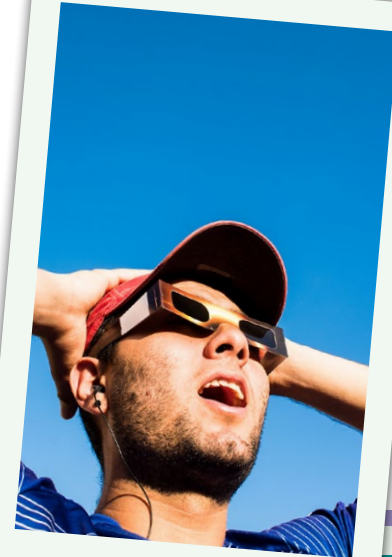
Increasing HPV vaccination rates is essential for cancer prevention and long-term community health. WDG Public Health remains committed to improving accessibility and education to achieve the 90% coverage goal and further reducing HPV-related cancers in the region.

Safe Sighting: Eclipse 2024

On April 8, 2024, a total solar eclipse was visible across parts of North America, including regions of Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The path of totality offered up to 4 minutes and 28 seconds of complete sun coverage in some areas, marking the first total solar eclipse visible in parts of Canada since 1979.

Public health agencies played a key role in preparing communities for the event, focusing primarily on eye safety. Messaging emphasized the use of ISO 12312-2 certified solar viewing glasses and warned against viewing the eclipse through unfiltered cameras, binoculars, or telescopes.

Protective eyewear was distributed by local health units, schools, libraries and other public organizations, while safe viewing events were organized to ensure access to both equipment and information.



Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum
Associate Medical Officer of Health, WDGPH



Dr. Ralph Chou
World Expert in Eye Safety, Solar Eclipses

Supporting Safe Solar Eclipse Viewing in Our Community

Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum, Associate Medical Officer of Health, discussed how to enjoy and view the solar eclipse safely with Dr. Ralph Chou, a world expert in eye safety and solar eclipses. WDGPH created the safe viewing video and provided online resources and media material to ensure the community was well informed about how to safely participate in this global event.

Thank you

Our mission at WDG Public Health is to protect health and promote overall well-being so everyone in our communities can thrive.

We are grateful to health care and community partners for their roles in supporting Public Health measures. With your care and commitment, critical Public Health programs and services are contributing to improved community wellbeing. Thank you for contributing your strength, passion, energy and vision.

wdgpublichealth.ca



Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the work of WDG Public Health operates on the traditional lands and home of the Hodinöhsö:ni', Anishinaabek, Tionontati and Attawandaron people and is steeped in the tradition of many First Nations, Inuit and Metis people.

As an Agency, we encourage our staff, partners and clients to support the work of reconciliation and promote healing with our indigenous neighbours.

We are also committed to reducing social inequities and will strive to make our services culturally appropriate and safe for all Indigenous people, their families and their community.