

OHA media briefing (March 26, 2021)

Good morning, I'm Patrick Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority. I'm joined this morning by Dr. Dean Sidelinger, our state health officer and Dr. Melissa Sutton, who oversees our COVID-19 testing program. Today I want to give you the latest information about vaccinations in Oregon, including the updates to our eligibility timelines which Governor Brown's office announced earlier this morning.

Dr. Sidelinger will give you an update on the state of the pandemic and the latest on variants. Dr. Sutton will update you on our testing capacity, where we stand in relation to the rest of the nation in testing and our COVID-19 positivity rate.

Then we'll be happy to take your questions.

In a week in which Oregon passed the milestone of administering primary doses to at least 1 million people, the two main points I want to talk about today are:

First, Oregon's recent high rate of vaccinating seniors has put us closer to most other states in the percentage of seniors who've been immunized, but some counties continue to lag. Second, this week Oregon received more than 24,000 doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, plus doses going directly to pharmacies in the federal program, but that amount was approximately 40,000 doses less than we expected.

We still expect to receive sufficient supplies of doses from the federal government to hit the new eligibility timelines Governor Brown just announced: Despite the disappointing shortfall in Johnson & Johnson, the numbers continue to show that our total supplies will be adequate to vaccinate all Oregon adults by early June.

Now let's look at the numbers.

As of today:

- 1,073,369 Oregonians have received at least one vaccination.
 - That total represents 8 in 10 of the approximately 1,317,000 people who are currently eligible to get vaccinated in Oregon.
 - Overall, 25 percent of Oregonians have received at least one shot. The national average is 26%.

- Oregon is averaging 26,268 doses administered each day.

Oregon has completed full two-dose vaccinations – or single dose Johnson & Johnson vaccines – for more than half a million people (579,122).

Overall, 14% of Oregonians have been fully vaccinated, which matches the national average.

Now let's look at where we stand in vaccinating seniors.

As of yesterday:

- Approximately half a million (508,250) people 65 and older have been vaccinated in Oregon. That number represents 66% of all Oregon seniors. That includes:
 - 70% of people 80 and above.
 - 71% of people between 75 and 80.
 - 69% of people 70 to 74.
 - And 60% of people 65-69 years old.
- Nationally, Oregon now ranks 38th in the nation in the percentage of seniors who have been vaccinated.

We've made important progress.

We knew there'd be turbulence, especially in the weeks that immediately followed the date a new band of seniors became eligible. We also knew that bumpy experience would smooth out over time as more doses became available and more people got vaccinated. And the sign-up challenges we saw seniors encountering in the early days helped us improve our notification and scheduling tools.

We still have work to do. But I want to thank every older adult who waited for an appointment for their patience while we worked through a number of different challenges. I'm grateful you made the choice to protect yourself and the people around you by getting vaccinated.

And for every senior who hasn't been vaccinated, I want to repeat the pledge I made at when we opened vaccinations to older adults.

- We have enough doses to vaccinate every senior: As of yesterday, Oregon vaccination sites have received approximately 1.6 million vaccines – more vaccines than the total number of people who are eligible.

- The COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. Go to covidvaccine.oregon.gov and find out how you can get vaccinated.

Now let's look at the changes in eligibility dates Governor Brown announced earlier this morning.

As you see in this slide:

- On March 29, all people in Group 6 will be eligible to get vaccinated statewide.
 - As you know, Group 6 includes as many as 800,000 people, ranging from adults 45 and older who have underlying conditions to migrant and seasonal farmworkers to people displaced by wildfires.
 - 22 counties began vaccinating people in Group 6 this week, after they attested that they were ready to move forward.
 - This is not a change from the timelines we've announced previously.
- We're now advancing the timeline up two weeks for frontline workers and other people in Group 7.
 - Frontline workers, younger people with underlying conditions and people living in multigenerational homes will now become eligible to get vaccinated on April 5.
 - In keeping with Oregon's commitment to equity, this change gives frontline workers and other Group 7 populations more time to get vaccinated.
 - It also ensures that counties that have seen a plateau in demand among older adults can make sure they can continue to keep putting shots in arms at a rapid pace.
- Everyone who is 16 years or older will continue to be eligible to get vaccinated on a statewide basis on May 1, as we announced last week, with one new change:
 - Counties may open to all residents on April 26, based on an application. We'll ask counties to include an attestation that they are ready to move forward and to document their efforts to vaccinate previously eligible populations and that they expect to have appointments available to expand sooner than May 1.
 - Counties must submit their applications by April 15.

- We will announce decisions by April 22.
- In counties that have been approved, everyone 16 and up could be eligible for a vaccine as early as April 26.

As you can see from this slide, we're still expecting to receive enough doses to vaccinate every Oregonian 16 or older by the end of May.

Based on these projections, we have enough doses to move frontline workers up to April 5 and give counties the option to expand eligibility to everyone by April 26, if they can show they have appointment availability.

Here are some of the highlights of the most recent allocation numbers that these projections are based on.

- For the coming week, Oregon will receive a total of 195,000 prime doses.
 - Johnson & Johnson accounted for 24,200 of our state allocation total, which was a significant shortfall in what we expected.
 - However, we do expect to see a jump in the amount of vaccines allocated to retail pharmacies through the federal pharmacy program.
 - We expect the retail pharmacy allocation will grow from 47,000 doses to more than 56,000 next week
 - We don't know what the federal supply to pharmacies looks like going forward, but we believe the administration may continue to direct more doses to pharmacies.
 - While our baseline Pfizer and Moderna allocations will remain stable next week, we did get a one-time 14,000 dose bump in our Pfizer supply, which allowed an increase in doses to mass vaccination clinics around Oregon.
- Going forward, we're still waiting for the full surge promised by the federal government.
 - The week of April 3, we tentatively expect to receive at least 230,000 prime doses.
 - Starting the week of April 10, we tentatively expect that total to grow to around 250,000 prime doses per week, which we expect to continue into May.
 - We've asked counties to develop surge plans to prepare for this infusion.

- At this time, we continue to distribute a vast majority of our state allocation on a per capita basis, based on each county's proportion of people age 16 and above.

Finally, let me provide a quick update on more changes to our covidvaccine.oregon.gov website and our Get Vaccinated Oregon eligibility and notification tool.

As of yesterday, approximately 550,000 Oregonians – more than half a million people – have registered at Get Vaccinated Oregon. As of this week, the tool now supports 10 languages other than English.

Two important changes I want to share with users of the website and the Get Vaccinated Oregon tool to know:

- First, the chatbot that has been helping people in the tri-county area schedule vaccination appointments at the Oregon Convention Center and other locations will be discontinued. Going forward, all vaccination registrations and notifications will be handled through the Get Vaccinated Oregon tool, which also can be found at the covidvaccine.oregon.gov web site.
- Second, beginning today, Friday, March 26, the Get Vaccinated Oregon tool will no longer accept landline phone numbers as a method of contact.

This change is intended to ensure that people do not mistake a call from a provider as a phone scam. There are approximately 200 people in the GVO who registered with a landline as their primary contact and no other way to contact them. In addition, approximately 300 people provided a landline and some other form of contact. If you're one of these individuals, please update your account.

Many people who registered in the GVO with a landline did their registration through 211. Anyone whose preferred method of contact is a landline can continue to call 211 for vaccine information.

As we come to the end of March, I'm again struck by how far we've come as a state in such a short time.

- 1 million Oregonians have received at least one vaccination, more than half a million of whom are seniors.

- By early April, we expect to close in on having vaccinated 3 out of every 4 seniors in Oregon.
- We're on track to give every Oregonian access to a vaccine before the beginning of June.

However, our biggest challenge lies ahead. Getting enough people to take the vaccine.

- Right now, as we get deeper into the senior population, we're seeing demand slow in some counties.
 - As this slide shows, the trendline on daily doses delivered is beginning to dip – not because of lack of supply, capacity or urgency, but because we've reached 80% of our eligible populations and demand is beginning to plateau.
- Some counties remain below 50% of seniors vaccinated – and not because they don't have appointments open.
- Some of the counties that are furthest behind in vaccination rates are counties that – conversely – have had our highest COVID-19 infection rates.

It's up to all of us to do our part and get vaccinated when it's our turn. Getting vaccinated is a way to keep ourselves, our families, and our communities safe from the virus. Once enough people get vaccinated, we will be free to further open up businesses and schools – and keep them open.

Get the facts. Make a plan to get vaccinated. Go to covidvaccine.oregon.gov for more information.

And now, let me turn it over to Dr. Sidelinger.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger:

Thank you, Director Allen. I will briefly summarize the status of the pandemic in Oregon then I'll provide an important update on our surveillance efforts of variant strains of the COVID-19 virus. Then Dr. Sutton will give us an overview on the status of COVID-19 testing in Oregon.

We continue to see a general trend of declining daily COVID-19 cases, virus-related hospitalizations and positive test results as more Oregonians are getting vaccinated every day. This is also because of the work of all

Oregonians in continuing to wear masks, gather more safely and keep your distance. Thank you.

Our rolling seven-day case average of new cases as of yesterday was 315. That's a decline of 73% since Jan. 1 and 52% since the beginning of February.

Among U.S. states Oregon is fourth lowest in cumulative daily cases per 100,000 people.

In our most recent weekly report, for the week from March 15 through March 21, OHA reported 1,920 cases, a 15% decrease from the previous week.

As of today, OHA has reported 163,295 cases of COVID-19 in Oregon.

Similarly, COVID-19 hospitalizations are also trending steadily lower. Yesterday, OHA reported 108 virus-stricken patients in our hospitals. That's a 77% decline in 2021.

COVID-19 related deaths have also fallen. To date, there have been 2,373 COVID-19 related deaths in Oregon. My thoughts go out to everyone who has experienced a loss to COVID-19.

Among states, Oregon ranks sixth lowest in the U.S. in daily deaths per 100,000 people over the last seven days and fifth lowest in cumulative deaths per 100,000 people.

As this month began, two-thirds of Oregon's 36 counties were classified as extreme or high risk from spread of COVID.

The paradigm has since flipped – the most recent metrics show 28 counties at either low or moderate risk. And the resulting guidance has opened more opportunities for all of us.

But that opportunity carries continued risk.

Now I want to talk a little about variant strains. Mutations in the virus have led to the emergence of variant strains.

Here in Oregon, we are fully invested in surveillance of the virus. Let me tell you a little about those efforts.

There are two levels of classification for variants of SARS-CoV-2, the underlying virus for COVID-19.

- The first classification is Variants of Interest: These are variants with specific mutations that are predicted to affect how the virus spreads, can be detected or can be treated.
- The second classification is Variants of Concern: These are variants with evidence for increased transmission or disease severity or evidence of an effect on testing, treatment or vaccine effectiveness.

To date, OHA has reported 18 cases of variants of either interest or concern.

Based on our observations, we are confident that the existing vaccines can effectively prevent severe infections resulting in hospitalizations and deaths.

Nationally, Oregon ranks fifth in the U.S. in the percentage of cumulative cases sequenced. Although that statistic is tempered somewhat by middle-of-the-pack standing in testing among states, though with a low percent positivity indicating that sufficient testing is happening – it is still an indication of the impressive surveillance that is taking place every day to stay informed and agile in our response to the virus.

Presently, labs at Oregon State University, the University of Oregon and at Oregon Health & Science University are sequencing SARS-CoV-2 genomes to detect and study mutations.

I am pleased to announce that the Oregon State Public Health Laboratory is adding that capability starting Monday, March 29. This will significantly expand our capacity to monitor changes in the COVID-19 virus, along with other diseases of significance.

Finally, as Director Allen noted, this past week, we reached the milestone of 1 million Oregonians who have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

That is a truly remarkable accomplishment given where we stood just three months ago.

This is a testament to the collaborative efforts Oregonians have been taking over the past year to protect themselves, their families and their communities by wearing masks, limiting their gatherings, keeping physical distance, washing our hands – and now of course taking the opportunity to get vaccinated.

Your dedication and commitment are paying off. Thank you.

And now let me turn things over to Dr. Sutton.

Dr. Melissa Sutton:

Thank you, Dr. Sidelinger.

Before I go into details on numbers and trends, let me reiterate OHA's commitment to COVID-19 testing. It is our duty to improve testing access for all people in Oregon and to directly provide testing to vulnerable and disproportionately affected communities.

Since the fall and winter surge began, we have seen testing volume increase from approximately 70,000 tests per week in early October to a peak of more than 170,000 tests per week in December — a 2.5-fold increase. Testing capacity has increased dramatically, and the testing supply chain has stabilized.

The amount of COVID-19 in the community, along with screening and surveillance testing, determine testing needs. As Dr. Sidelinger pointed out, we have seen COVID-19 cases fall dramatically. Correspondingly, our average weekly testing volume has also decreased — to approximately 95,000 the week of March 14.

Since Jan. 31, Oregon's percent positivity — a reflection of both the amount of disease in the community and the amount of testing performed — has held steady at 5% or less. As of March 14, our statewide percent positivity was 2.2%.

We are doing an incredible amount of testing relative to the amount of disease in our community. Our percent positivity reflects this.

However, testing access remains an issue for some people in Oregon and bridging that gap remains a priority for OHA.

In February alone, OHA offered 27 low-barrier testing events across 14 counties. And since the pandemic began, we have offered more than 200 low-barrier testing events and tested more than 23,000 people in Oregon. We will continue to offer these free testing events statewide.

What does COVID-19 testing look like going forward?

- We will continue to offer Abbott BinaxNOW testing resources to public and private K-12 schools (and school-related sports teams) statewide to support testing of staff or students who develop symptoms at school or are exposed to a case in school.
- We will expand our partnerships with community-based organizations to plan and support statewide low-barrier testing events with specifically focused testing of disproportionately impacted populations.
- We will facilitate testing of uninsured persons statewide through partnerships with healthcare systems serving vulnerable populations.
- We will launch a mail-in testing option for close contacts of COVID-19 patients under quarantine. This testing will be free to uninsured people and available to anyone who is unable to get tested locally.
- We will increase our mobile testing capacity to provide testing where it is most needed.

I'll finish today by reminding you that testing remains an effective tool in our efforts to curb COVID-19 but testing alone cannot control the spread of COVID-19. The two most powerful tools we have against this pandemic are basic public health interventions like masking, physical distancing and avoiding social gatherings and vaccination. I urge all Oregonians to get your vaccine when you are eligible.

And now we'll take your questions.

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