

OHA media briefing, July 22, 2021

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen:

Good afternoon, I'm Patrick Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority. Thank you for joining today's COVID-19 briefing. I'm joined by Dr. Dean Sidelinger, our state health officer, who'll give you an update on where we're seeing new cases and tell you the latest information about the Delta variant's expanding foothold in Oregon.

Before we begin, I want to let you know that at this time we plan to resume our COVID-19 media briefings on a monthly basis, now that we're 3 weeks into reopening. Look for our next regular briefing in August.

However, we're prepared to increase the frequency of these updates, if necessary. And of course, we'll call news conferences if there are any breaking news events that warrant an immediate announcement.

In the meantime, you can continue to send your daily questions to our media inbox: orCOVID19.media@dhsosha.state.or.us.

Now let's turn to the COVID-19 situation today.

- **First, Oregon is open, but the pandemic is not over, especially for people who remain unvaccinated.**
 - New COVID-19 cases are surging for people who are unvaccinated.
 - As Dr. Sidelinger will show, the Delta variant has increased 10-fold in the past 2 weeks.
 - The number of new cases we're reporting each day has doubled since last week. Hospitalizations are up.
 - ✓ Today, our new reported infections are about 25% higher (539) than what we reported yesterday (421).
 - More than 9 in 10 new infections, hospitalizations and deaths continue to occur among people who are unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated.
 - In contrast, the pandemic is fading for people who are vaccinated. If you are vaccinated, and those around you are vaccinated, you can continue to resume normal activities with peace of mind.

- All the current, best science tells us that all three vaccines protect you against severe COVID-19 illness, hospitalization and death, even if you are exposed to any of the current variants of concern (including the Delta variant).
- **Second, the pandemic is not over in communities with low vaccination rates.** The SARS-CoV-2 virus is circulating in every Oregon community, but it is spreading fastest in Oregon counties with low vaccination rates. In counties with high vaccination rates, the virus is struggling to sustain itself.
 - Today Umatilla County reported 70 cases and had a test positivity rate of 14.2 percent. Jackson County reported 63 cases, with a test positivity rate of 17 percent.
 - Umatilla County’s one-dose vaccination rate is 43 percent. For Jackson County it’s 54 percent.
 - In contrast, much larger Washington County reported 43 cases with a positivity rate of 4.1 percent. In Washington County, 75 percent of residents have received at least one dose.
- **Third, at this time, a localized pandemic demands effective localized public health interventions, not a statewide response.** OHA stands ready to help local leaders and local public health officials in places where COVID-19 is running rampant due to low vaccination rates.
 - I’ve been having conversations with many local officials. I urge local leaders in counties with high infection rates, high test positivity rates and low vaccination rates to take action *now*.
 - As we’ve learned with previous COVID-19 waves, the sooner we employ effective interventions, the sooner we can flatten the curve, prevent new infections, avoid more hospitalizations and save many lives.
 - If you’re a local leader in a low vaccination county:
 - Encourage people who are unvaccinated to get immunized. Promote local vaccination events. Work with local businesses to help their workers get vaccinated.
 - Call on residents to wear masks in indoor public places.
 - Encourage people who are unvaccinated to avoid social gatherings.

Let's take a closer look at where our state and counties stand in both vaccination and infection rates.

- **At the state level:**

- Oregon has vaccinated 71 percent of adults, according to the CDC. That's 2,379,556 people who've received at least a first dose.
- In Oregon, 60 percent of our total population are now vaccinated with at least one dose.
- Oregon remains 12th in the nation at 55 percent of our total population who are fully vaccinated and 18th in the nation at 60 percent of the population who've received at least one dose.

We're continuing to expand our vaccination campaign, including new messages featuring younger adults of color that you'll see during the Olympics. We're working with community partners to reach more people of color. We're standing up canvassers who can go door-to-door in more populous parts of the state to answer vaccination questions and connect people to local vaccine clinics.

- **But the picture is more complicated at the county level:**

- Across Oregon, counties have vaccinated between 37 percent to 75 percent of their populations.
- Low county vaccination rates have a direct correlation with higher COVID-19 infection rates:
 - Over the past week, case rates in 15 counties exceeded the statewide average of 44.9 cases per 100,000 population.
 - All 15 counties had vaccination rates of lower than 55 percent for the total population, and 13 of them had rates lower than 47 percent.

Let's look at how this dynamic plays out across all counties.

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This scatterplot shows Oregon counties by case rate and vaccination rate. Vaccination rate is on the y-axis and case rate is on the x-axis. Counties that have both high vaccination rates and low case rates are in the upper left quadrant. Counties that have high case rates and low vaccination rates are in the lower right quadrant. As you can see:

- Counties with low vaccination rates are all counties with the highest infection rates.
- Counties with high vaccination rates are almost entirely counties with the lowest infection rates.

It's that stark. It's that simple.

This graph also shows why we need local county officials to take action. This latest wave of COVID-19 – super-charged by the Delta variant and fueled by vulnerable and unvaccinated Oregonians – is not a statewide challenge at this time.

We needed a statewide response at the outset of the pandemic and over the following months when we had no effective way to combat COVID-19, except for social distancing and masks.

- The emergency measures Governor Brown put in place worked: They saved more than 4,000 lives.
- Oregon has the 5th lowest COVID-19 death rate in the nation.

Then we received the first safe, effective and free COVID-19 vaccines. While it took several months to vaccinate a critical mass of 70 percent of adult Oregonians, the vaccines allowed Oregon to reopen.

But the virus has evolved. And it now poses an even greater threat to the unvaccinated - the Delta variant.

And that threat is concentrated among unvaccinated people living in low vaccination counties.

As I heard a health officer say earlier this week: if you're not vaccinated and you haven't had COVID-19 yet, you will. It's only a matter of time.

So once again, my message to county leaders with high infection and low vaccination rates is: Take action now. Urge residents in your communities to get vaccinated. Urge people to wear masks. Tell people who are unvaccinated to avoid social gatherings.

OHA stands ready to help. We will send you more vaccine doses. We can help with case investigators and contact tracers. We can get you more testing. We're

eager to work with you to schedule more vaccine clinics and conduct outreach in your communities.

And with that let me turn it over to Dr. Sidelinger who can tell you more about the Delta variant and the risks it poses to unvaccinated people in Oregon.

Oregon State Health Officer and Epidemiologist, Doctor Dean Sidelinger:

Thank you, Director Allen.

Let me begin today by providing an update on the pandemic, then speak briefly about the increasing presence of the Delta variant and the risk it poses, especially to unvaccinated Oregonians.

At our last media availability, about a month ago, I reported that daily cases, COVID-19 related hospitalizations and the percentage of people testing positive, all were in steady decline.

But over the past several weeks, all three of those indicators have reversed course. We are seeing steep increases in daily cases, and hospitalizations, even higher than the projection in our latest modeling report.

And that further contrasts the two pandemics here in Oregon.

One pandemic is subsiding for more than 2.4 million Oregonians who have received the COVID-19 vaccine. You can move about freely without a mask, you don't need to worry about attending gatherings. You have excellent protection against severe disease and good protection against getting sick from COVID. Thank you for taking the step to protect you and your loved ones.

But for the remaining Oregonians – especially those in communities where vaccinations are lagging, the resurging virus still looms large.

This is especially true with the rise of variants that are more easily transmissible. You remain vulnerable to getting seriously ill or passing the virus to someone who might wind up in the hospital or dying.

The science supports - and our data shows - that if you are fully vaccinated, you can have confidence that a get-together with friends, or a day at work alongside others won't put you at high-risk to contract or pass COVID-19 to others.

I thank all of you who have made that decision and taken that step to protect your families, your loved ones and communities. If you are a parent with young children not yet eligible to be vaccinated or have others in your house not protected from the vaccines, you may still make different choices to protect them – such as limiting gatherings or continuing to wear a mask.

People who have not been vaccinated – or have only recently been vaccinated – cannot yet safely enjoy a backyard barbecue, attend a wedding or attend a sporting event without wearing a mask and keeping distant, for fear of infection.

My message today is to people who have not yet been vaccinated. You are in harm's way.

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Here are the alarming details.

- On July 1, our 7-day average of daily cases was 181, which represented a 45% drop from the previous month. Now, only three weeks later, that average more than doubled, to 378 daily cases.

Less than a month ago – on June 30 – OHA reported 1,371 new daily cases of COVID-19, the lowest weekly case since count in more than a year. Yesterday, OHA reported 2,026 weekly cases of COVID-19, a staggering 48% increase.

We are seeing the same troubling trajectory for COVID-19 related hospitalizations, a pattern that could lead to the statewide impacts on patient care we experienced last fall and winter.

- On July 9 there were 99 people with COVID-19 related illness in Oregon's hospitals. Today there are 169, a 70 percent increase.
- Over the same time period, the number of COVID-19 patients filling intensive care units increased by 19%. There are 38% more ICU patients since July 1.

More people are also testing positive for COVID-19.

- On July 1 the rate of percent positivity was 2.9% which represented a 40% decline from the previous month. Three weeks later that rate is 4.9%, a 70% increase.

Earlier this month, OHA posted the latest report on breakthrough cases among people who were vaccinated in June.

The report found that 92% of the 7,241 COVID-19 cases recorded in June were among people who were either not fully vaccinated.

More than 9 out of 10 of the COVID-19 associated deaths for that month were among people who were not fully vaccinated.

[Slide 2 variant]

Against that discouraging backdrop, we are seeing a sudden spike in the Delta variant. At present we have tracked nearly 3,000 cases involving Variants of Concern.

As this slide shows, sequenced cases of the Delta variant have increased from 30% to 50% in the most recent week, and a 10-fold increase over the past two weeks.

It is now the dominant variant circulating in Oregon and we expect to see a continued increase of the variant in the coming weeks.

The emergence of this highly contagious variant should be a red alert to those who remain unvaccinated. You are at higher risk now than you were earlier in the pandemic and you are putting the people around you at risk.

That is why it is recommended that people who are not fully vaccinated continue to practice public health interventions such as wearing a mask indoors and in outdoor crowded settings so that they can protect themselves and their loved ones from COVID-19.

The best protection against contracting the virus is getting vaccinated. The COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. They were exhaustively tested in clinical trials and that efficacy is reflected in the data here in Oregon.

Oregonians have shown amazing resilience over the past year and a half. Thank you to everyone who has helped fight back against this virus in Oregon over the last year and a half – but our fight is not over. My thoughts go out to everyone mourning the loss of a loved one or still fighting the effects of COVID.

I urge all Oregonians who have not yet done so to get vaccinated for the safety of yourselves, your loved ones and your community.

COVID-19 has proven to be a stubborn enemy. Only through COVID vaccination can we defeat this foe – once and for all.

And now we can open it up for questions.