

## Oregon Health Authority Media Briefing, Aug .17, 2022

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Good afternoon, I'm Dr. Dean Sidelinger, health officer and state epidemiologist at Oregon Health Authority (OHA). Thank you for joining us for our August update on the state's continued response to COVID-19.

Today I'll be providing information on the state's ongoing measures to safeguard and care for all Oregonians. I also want to provide an update on OHA's and the Oregon Department of Education's (ODE) efforts to support the health and well-being of hundreds of thousands of Oregon children in our schools for the 2022-2023 school year.

First, I want to highlight the generally improving trends we are seeing with the status of COVID-19 in Oregon.

Since OHA's last update, on July 20, daily reported case counts have decreased from a rolling seven-day average of 1,406 cases reported July 20, to 852 reported Aug. 16. This mirrors what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is recording nationally. In Oregon, test positivity is down from 13.8% reported the week of July 20 to 11.4% reported the week of Aug. 7.

As we've shared in our regular updates, the number of reported cases does not capture the full story. Many people take at-home tests, and the results are not reported to public health. And many others are not testing. What we do know from reported tests and wastewater monitoring is there are still high levels of COVID-19 transmission in Oregon.

On Aug. 11, the CDC reported five counties (Sherman, Wasco, Umatilla, Wallowa and Coos counties) were in the CDC's high COVID-19 Community level, indicating high levels of COVID-19 and increased stress on hospitals. This is a favorable trend from a month earlier, when 22 counties recorded high levels of COVID-19 and stress on hospitals.

Our data continue to indicate that the Omicron subvariant BA.5 remains the predominant strain.

OHA continues to work with nearly 40 communities statewide and Oregon State University to monitor COVID-19 transmission through wastewater surveillance. Wastewater monitoring confirms that Oregon saw its last peak in mid-July, and we continue to see general declines in viral concentrations since then.

Now, I want to highlight hospitalization numbers.

Since our update on July 20, the number hospitalized patients with COVID-19 in Oregon steadily declined from a peak of 464. As of today, the number of COVID-19-positive patients in hospitals is 328.

The latest forecast from Oregon Health & Science University's modeling team led by Dr. Peter Graven, published Aug. 5, reported that the portion of visits to emergency rooms related to symptoms thought to be COVID-19 fell to 4.2%, from 6.9%, reported July 9. The model suggests there was a low hospitalization rate from infections, with a significant share of hospitalizations (56%) projected to be incidental.

Overall, COVID-19-positive patients in hospital, and in ICU care, remain far below the peaks we saw during the Delta surge a year ago and the Omicron surge this past winter.

Hospitals are seeing impacts of patients with other diseases and adverse conditions. Patients who had delayed procedures are now having to seek specialized care they need. This is on top of pressures our health care workforce has faced from COVID-19 after more than two and a half years battling the pandemic.

In addition, some hospitals are unable to fully discharge some patients who may not need hospital-level care.

OHA is in close communication with hospital partners and working with them, and also the state legislature, on ways to support health care systems to address these statewide challenges and remain ready if we see rising numbers. We want to ensure hospital beds are available for any patient requiring urgent care from a possible crash, cardiac incident or other life-threatening event.

Now I'd like to talk about what we can expect this fall with new vaccines and boosters.

As you know, the federal government recently announced the purchase of bivalent COVID-19 vaccine boosters from both Pfizer and Moderna for the entire country, for possible use this fall and winter—with a total of 171 million bivalent vaccine booster doses to be made available for the fall and beyond. The bivalent booster would be designed to target BA.4 and BA.5 Omicron subvariants and the original strain.

The federal government, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and CDC, will update states when the doses may be available. At this time, we do not have a specific date.

Meanwhile, our current boosters for the Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines are widely administered and are still working very well to prevent severe disease, hospitalization and death. Last month, the Novavax vaccine was authorized for use as the initial vaccine in adults. This new, two-dose vaccine uses protein technology, which has been used widely for decades and around the world in vaccines for shingles, hepatitis B and the flu.

As of now, everyone 6 months and older is eligible for COVID-19 vaccines. And as of today, nearly 7 in 10 Oregonians are fully vaccinated, and more than 4 in 10 are boosted.

OHA's message to anyone who is eligible for a booster is simple — if you are eligible, get your booster now and do not wait until the fall.

Fall is also when we encourage all residents to get seasonal influenza vaccinations. Flu shots are arriving in Oregon now. Most people begin to get their flu shots in September and October. It is perfectly safe for you to get the flu vaccine at the same time you get your COVID-19 vaccine or booster. You may wish to check when you schedule your appointment to make sure your provider has both.

Finally, if you do get COVID-19, remember there are highly effective treatments, including Paxlovid, available, to help prevent severe disease in those at greatest

risk for complications. You can find out about treatments and therapeutics on OHA's COVID-19 website.

OHA strongly encourages anyone who may be at increased risk, because of age or underlying health conditions, to make a plan for how and where you will get tested and receive treatment, in case you get COVID-19. Anyone who doesn't have a health care provider can contact their local health center or call 2-1-1.

Now I want to talk about the school year. Many of us look forward to the sounds of children filling empty school halls and the happiness that brings. Thank you to all of our education and early childhood staff for your dedication, particularly during the past few years adapting to COVID-19's impacts on your schools and classrooms.

As a pediatrician and now as the state health officer, I know first-hand that schools are critical to our children's social and emotional well-being. I know they also create opportunities for viruses and illnesses to spread.

For parents, getting your children vaccinated against COVID-19 is an easy and safe way to help protect your whole family. COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective for children 6 months and older. The vaccines were tested over several months and with thousands of children from several races and ethnicities.

If you have not already done so, I recommend you start your child's COVID-19 vaccination series as soon as possible.

Families may also want to have their children get multiple vaccines at the same time. August is National Immunization Awareness Month, which makes it a good time to talk with your child's health care provider about what vaccines your child needs to stay healthy this school year. It is safe and effective for your child to receive a COVID-19 vaccine at the same time they receive other immunizations.

Many families may have held off on scheduling well-child visits and recommended vaccinations during the COVID-19 pandemic. It's understandable that parents may have been hesitant to take their child to an appointment. We want parents to know that health care providers are taking necessary precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The immunization schedule is designed to provide immunity early in life, before children are likely to be exposed to diseases. Some are serious and potentially life-

threatening. Some vaccines also require more than one dose to provide children with the best protection. Each recommended dose is important to gain full protection. This is also important now because vaccine-preventable diseases are still circulating.

OHA's Vaccines for Children (VFC) program offers vaccines at no-cost to families who cannot afford to pay for their children's vaccines. Those without health insurance can call 2-1-1 to find out how the program can help.

Check the OHA website ([www.oregon.gov/oha/](http://www.oregon.gov/oha/)) and search for "Required Shots for School and Children's Facilities" to learn what immunizations are required for your child to attend school in Oregon.

**And now I want to turn the microphone over to Colt Gill, director of the Oregon Department of Education, to talk about safety and the start of the new school year.**

#### **Final OHA closing messages**

With OHA's announcement today of the first pediatric monkeypox (hMPXV) case in Oregon, many families may be wondering, what does this mean for schools?

School settings present low risk for transmission of monkeypox. As we continue to face this outbreak, we will have students, staff or teachers who are diagnosed with monkeypox. We encourage them to stay home if they are sick or develop a new rash. Seek care for testing and treatment. This will help minimize potential exposures – even exposures that present low risks for transmission – in schools.

We are asking schools to plan for how they will support staff and students who may have prolonged times isolating at home while they recover. Schools should plan for how they will protect confidentiality of school community members who are sick and address monkeypox in a non-stigmatizing manner. Anyone with prolonged skin-to-skin contact with an individual with monkeypox can get monkeypox. Right now, the disease is spreading primarily in gay, bisexual or queer men who report recent sexual activity with other men – and that is where we are focusing our prevention and response efforts.

Lastly, I want to thank everyone in Oregon who continues to care for each other and their neighbors. All of us can still take simple steps to look after our fellow Oregonians, especially as school starts. Along with being up to date with vaccinations, each of us still can wear well-fitting masks in indoor settings. For those at high risk, or those who care for or live with someone at high risk, wearing a mask in indoor public places offers extra protection. Wearing a mask in areas of the state seeing higher COVID-19 transmission also provides protections to others around you.

And with that I will open it up to questions from reporters.