

Oregon Health Authority Media Briefing, May 18, 2022
Dean Sidelinger, M.D. MSEd, Health Officer and State Epidemiologist

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

This is OHA's second monthly media availability since we announced our priorities March 11 for the next phase of the pandemic response. Our framework, the "RISE" plan (Resilience in Support of Equity), prioritizes protecting people at highest risk and continues our partnership with our communities to advance our work to eliminate health inequities.

All of us are ready to move on from COVID, but unfortunately the virus continues to spread throughout our state — and there are some steps each of us can take to protect ourselves and our loved ones. We can support our neighbors who are recovering from COVID or battling long-term symptoms. We can grieve with our fellow Oregonians as many continue to lose family members and friends to this disease.

Today, I will highlight our latest data and OHA's ongoing efforts to keep Oregonians informed and safe, including through access to vaccines and boosters, as well as therapeutic treatments.

First, the state maintains measures that protect Oregonians, including our most vulnerable residents:

- State vaccination requirements remain for those working in health care settings, congregate care settings and K–12 schools.
- Mask requirements also remain for health care, long-term care and other congregate care settings.

It's now been more than two months since statewide indoor mask-wearing requirements were lifted outside of these settings. With spring's arrival, many of us are resuming the activities we enjoyed previously, such as traveling and gathering with friends and families. This also means we are increasing our chances for exposure, particularly indoors.

Our surveillance also shows the predominant strain in Oregon, Omicron variant BA.2, remains highly transmissible and widespread statewide. Like its predecessor, the Omicron variant BA.1, it is a stubborn adversary. Around the country, as in Oregon, we are seeing rises in new cases and hospitalizations caused by BA.2.

Unfortunately, these developments tell us that the pandemic is not over. If you're in a gathering of people outside your home, sooner or later you will be exposed to the virus. This could be where you worship, where you work, where you recreate, where you shop, or where you connect with friends and family.

The risk of exposure and infection exists in every Oregon community, and we see that in our statewide data. In the four weeks since our last update, test positivity has risen from 7% on April 20 to 11.4% on May 16. During the last month, daily reported case counts more than doubled as well, from a rolling seven-day average of 600 cases a day on April 20, to 1,350 reported on May 16. And, we also know that most cases are not being reported to public health — both because testing is occurring at home and because some individuals do not get tested. So, our state and national trends all tell us significant disease transmission is occurring. Recent data shows a slowing of the increase in reported cases, indicating we may be nearing the top of this current peak.

OHA is optimistic the overall number of Oregon's hospitalized patients with COVID-19 will not exceed our hospital system's ability to care for them. Since our April 20 update, hospitalizations have nearly doubled, from 110 to 251 COVID-19-positive patients. Modeling from Oregon Health & Science University and the team led by Dr. Peter Graven project that the number of COVID-19-positive patients in Oregon's hospitals will peak at 321 around June 10. This is less than a third of the number we saw during the Delta and Omicron waves, when we experienced peaks of 1,178 on Sept. 1 and 1,130 patients on Jan. 27, respectively. OHA continues to watch COVID-19 hospitalizations closely and to support our state's hospital systems. If required, we would be ready respond to any future surges.

OHA and its partners continue to track the new subvariants, such as BA.4 and BA.5. Evidence suggests existing vaccines and the level of vaccination and previous exposure to the virus still provide significant protection to prevent severe illness for most people.

We also want to discuss the school advisory sent last week to state K-12 educators by OHA and the Oregon Department of Education, to ensure schools can operate in-person through the remainder of the school year.

As of last Friday, with six Oregon counties listed at mid-level risk, according to the CDC's Community Levels system of low, medium and high risk, OHA and ODE encouraged schools to continue using "layered-mitigation strategies." This includes recommending face coverings or considering their universal use before making any decision for remote instruction or to end in-person instruction.

In addition, OHA and ODE recommend that anyone may choose to wear a mask because of their individual risk level, such as their risk of severe disease or having family or community members at higher risk for severe disease. They also suggested schools continue using free COVID-19 testing programs for students and staff.

In addition, our local public health partners are continuing to inform their residents about COVID-19 trends in their areas. Last week Multnomah County recommended its residents consider wearing masks for the next few weeks in school, work and other indoor settings.

Finally, we want to address concerns of those at greatest risk. Residents at high risk of severe illness from COVID-19 will face greater challenges, even if they have been vaccinated and boosted. Those with underlying medical conditions or who are immunocompromised should consider contacting their health care providers now to make a plan to get tested and receive treatment — should they become ill. People who don't have a health care provider can contact their local community health center or call 211.

OHA strongly encourages residents with these risk factors to minimize indoor social gatherings. We recommend wearing masks in these social settings, and choose the highest quality mask that fits them well.

Medication is available in many pharmacies and clinics for treatment of COVID-19 in people at increased risk for severe illness. Treatment should start within five days of symptom onset to be effective. Those at increased risk should plan now for where they will seek health care and get treatment if they develop COVID-like

symptoms including cough, sore throat, or fever. That way they can get tested and start treatment quickly if they have COVID-19 infection.

You can find out where these medications are available on the federal Test to Treat locator that can be found on our [COVID-19 Treatments Webpage](#), and at: <https://covid-19-test-to-treat-locator-dhhs.hub.arcgis.com/>.

I'd like to thank our many partners and providers who continue to serve residents as deal with the latest changes. Thanks also to all Oregonians for taking steps protect yourselves, your families, your co-workers and your neighbors. If we each take steps to protect ourselves and our loved ones, COVID does not have to dominate our lives. Being vaccinated and boosted is the best way to protect ourselves from severe disease. Some of us will continue to be more cautious because of our own health or the health of those around us. Let's support each other as we move through this phase of the COVID pandemic.

And with that, I can now take some questions.