

OHA Media Briefing (April 20, 2023) Dr. Dean Sidelinger, Health Officer and State Epidemiologist, OHA

Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Dean Sidelinger, health officer and state epidemiologist with Oregon Health Authority. Thank you for joining us.

I want to start with a reminder that today's media briefing will be our last monthly or *regular* COVID-19 update for the media. We of course stand ready to restart these briefings at regular intervals, if needed, based on conditions with COVID-19 and our other seasonal respiratory viruses, such as RSV and influenza.

For now, however, we are closing out these regular briefings because we are confident that – thanks to increased immunity among people who have been vaccinated or previously had COVID-19 – risk remains low. But risk is not nonexistent: As with any infection, like influenza, whose constant but low-level presence we have come to live with, we anticipate that COVID-19 will be with us for the foreseeable future – perhaps forever.

That means we will still see infections; we will still recommend wearing masks sometimes to protect people around us at higher risk of severe COVID outcomes; and some settings, such as health care facilities, may still have policies requiring that masks be worn; we will still need to stay up to date on COVID-19 vaccines, recommendations for which continue to evolve: just this week, FDA and CDC have simplified their recommendations and authorized an additional bivalent booster dose for persons at highest risk of severe outcomes. And tragically, we will still see some deaths from COVID-19.

But our outlook overall for COVID-19 continues to be good.

And to anyone who has been affected by COVID-19, or cared for or lost a loved one to the virus, my heart – my sorrow – goes out to you.

Outlook

In Oregon, and nationally, COVID cases, deaths and hospitalizations are trending downward, according to the latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data.

On March 30, we finally dropped below the 200 mark for hospitalizations, which we have not seen since May 2022. On Tuesday, April 18, we had 172 hospitalized COVID-19 positive patients in Oregon, which was slightly higher than the week before, but still represents a steady downward trend from our recent hospitalization peak of 370 on November 29, 2022.

To put that number in perspective, our highest hospitalization count during the pandemic was 1,178, which occurred on September 1, 2021, during the Delta surge. We've come a long way.

The percentage of reported COVID-19 test results that were positive has stayed relatively flat since the start of the year, with a slight jump occurring in late March. We expect this trend to continue, particularly as new subvariants continue to evolve and enter Oregon over the next several months.

One variant we are keeping an eye on is XBB.1.16. Although we're not yet seeing XBB.1.16 in our sequencing data, Dr. Peter Graven's team at Oregon Health & Science University is predicting that XBB.1.16, along with a variant called XBB.1.9, will likely cause a COVID-19 infection wave similar to the recent BA.4/BA.5 and winter waves, since XBB.1.16 in particular appears to evade COVID-19 immunity in some areas. Even so, the wave is expected to peak by the end of June. This is a long-term forecast – in COVID terms – and I expect to see adjustments in the numbers over the coming months as we learn more about infections from these variants.

Because of our COVID-19 outlook and our winding down from the pandemic response, we are expecting a number of changes as the federal COVID-19 Public Health Emergency ends on May 11, and FEMA funding for some COVID activities also wraps up.

Commercialization

Since December 2020 and throughout the pandemic, the federal government has provided COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics to everyone in the U.S. at no cost.

With the ending of the federal Public Health Emergency, COVID-19 vaccines will be shifting to commercialization, which means pharmaceutical companies will distribute and sell them like other vaccines. Therapeutics commercialization is product-dependent with different timelines; some are already available commercially.

This transition is likely to take place sometime early fall 2023 for vaccines and by the end of 2023 for therapeutics.

Right now, there are many unknowns regarding the commercialization process. For example, we don't know what COVID vaccine and therapeutics prices will be. OHA is working with other state agencies and the CDC to ensure everyone in Oregon will have continued, equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics once commercialization takes place.

We are developing a plan to ensure a smooth transition to commercialized COVID-19 vaccine and will continue to provide partners with information and resources on COVID-19 vaccine commercialization as it becomes available.

The CDC includes COVID-19 vaccinations on the routine child and adult vaccination schedules, so they will be covered by insurance. The federal government also recently announced an increased investment to provide vaccinations to those without insurance.

Vaccine events

Another result of the ending of the federal Public Health Emergency is that OHA will no longer hold FEMA-funded community vaccination events.

These events were at sites large and small, from the high-volume vaccination events the former Multnomah Greyhound Park in Wood Village, the Expo Center

in Portland and Tektronix in Hillsboro, to smaller events at schools, farm and agricultural worksites, long-term care facilities, jails and shelters.

These sites were hugely efficient at administering the many types of vaccine doses that were offered over the course of the pandemic in 2021 and 2022, including the monovalent primary and booster doses, and the bivalent booster doses. Some events even offered the influenza and mpox vaccines, as well as COVID testing.

In total, more than 340,000 vaccine doses were administered at more than 6,300 vaccination events.

I want to thank OHA's field operations team, our local public health and community partners, federal and tribal partners and everyone who made these events such a success during this critical time.

My Electronic Vaccine Card

Access to My Electronic Vaccine Card (MEVC) – at myelectronicvaccinecard.oregon.gov – will end May 11 when the system is decommissioned and archived. People can still use the e-card through the service as proof of their COVID-19 vaccine indefinitely, but they should add any boosters to the card before May 11. After that time, they will not be able update their information, nor will people be able to set up new accounts.

There are other ways to prove COVID-19 vaccination. They include showing the original white record card from the CDC (or photo of card), or showing your immunization record from your health care provider or the OHA's ALERT IIS system.

Lessons learned in developing My Electronic Vaccine Card will inform future efforts to provide easy access to personal vaccination records, and the system itself can be used in future public health emergencies.

Today, a total of 95,005 COVID vaccination records have been successfully viewed through My Electronic Vaccine Card since April 21, 2022, with 24,328 of those done by repeat requests for an updated record.

Bivalent boosters

As many of you are aware, on Tuesday the U.S. Food and Drug Administration once again amended the emergency use authorizations of the Moderna and Pfizer COVID-19 bivalent vaccines. Only bivalent vaccines are now authorized—both for the primary series and for boosters; and FDA authorized a 2nd bivalent booster for persons 65 years of age and older and for people 6 and older with certain immunocompromising conditions. Yesterday, CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices discussed simplified recommendations for these vaccines; these recommendations were affirmed by the CDC.

Stay tuned for additional recommendations, including whether regular boosters will be needed. We recommend anyone who is now eligible to get the bivalent booster do so as soon as they can. They can get the booster through their health care provider, a county public health vaccine clinic, federally qualified health centers and local pharmacies.

And as of today, 78.3% of people of all ages in Oregon have received at least one dose of one of the original monovalent COVID-19 vaccines; 70.3% completed a primary vaccination series; unfortunately, only 22.2% have received a bivalent booster shot.

OHP coverage

Finally, I wanted to share a quick update, on behalf of my colleagues at the Health Systems Division, on Oregon Health Plan coverage as the public health emergency winds down.

When the pandemic hit, the federal government extended benefits to states that kept people on the Oregon Health Plan, Oregon's Medicaid system. As the public health emergency winds down, Oregon *continues to move the dial on equity work* and remains laser-focused on achieving health and service equity. We can only do

this by trying to keep as many people as possible connected to benefits and covered by a health plan.

Redetermination for Oregon Health Plan coverage *began April 1* and, depending on the date they are scheduled for renewal, OHP members will receive a renewal notice between now and January 2024.

As our media partners, you can help us by reminding people to keep their mailing address, phone number and email address current to ensure they receive vital information about their benefits. Oregonians should be watching for letters about their benefits from the state's ONE Customer Service Center. Their renewal letters will tell them what to do. Not everyone will get their letters at the same time.

For more information and to keep coverage, people can visit keepcovered.oregon.gov.

Closing

Now that Oregon's public health emergency order has expired, the last of the state mask requirements has lifted and the federal Public Health Emergency is coming to an end, we can now return to those activities and functions we all enjoyed before the pandemic began in early 2020, but some may continue to make some changes to protect their health and the health of those around them. But we also have a keen understanding of the devastating effect an organism like COVID-19 can have on individuals and families, on tribal communities and communities of color, on our state, our country and our world.

We know our lives will never be the same, and that COVID-19 will likely always be with us. That's why it will be important for everyone to stay prepared by knowing your risk of severe illness and reducing that risk by staying up to date on vaccinations; making a plan for protecting yourself and others if you get sick; and taking action by getting tested if you have symptoms, contacting your health care provider if you test positive, and protecting others by wearing a mask. Thank you to all of my fellow Oregonians who continue to take these steps.

I want to thank all of you, our media partners, for attending these briefings over the last three years and sharing what you learn with your readers, listeners and viewers. You serve a critical function in the dissemination of important, life-saving information that helps people in Oregon keep themselves, their families, their neighbors and their whole communities safe.

With that, I'm happy to take your questions.