

Oregon Health Authority Media Briefing, Aug. 6, 2021
Dr. Melissa Sutton, Senior Health Advisor

Thank you, Robb. I am Dr. Melissa Sutton, the Medical Director of Respiratory Viral Pathogens at Oregon Health Authority and a Senior Health Advisor for the COVID-19 response. With me today are **Dr. Grant Niskanen, Vice President of Medical Affairs, at Sky Lakes Medical Center** in Klamath Falls and **Dr. Robert Turngren, Chief Physician Executive at Samaritan Health Services**.

Today I want to talk about a major new national vaccine effectiveness study, which includes significant data from Oregon. These data, combined with Oregon's latest vaccine breakthrough report, tell us:

- All three COVID-19 vaccines are extremely effective in preventing severe COVID-19 infection leading to hospitalization.
- All three COVID-19 vaccines are fighting the virus as effectively in the real world as they did in clinical trials.
- In Oregon specifically, the COVID-19 vaccines continue to reduce the risk of hospitalization and death in the face of the Delta variant. In July, 91% of COVID-19 deaths were among Oregonians who were unvaccinated.

Dr. Niskanen and Dr. Turngren will tell us how younger and sicker people are filling beds at Sky Lakes and other hospitals and how this dire trend affects every Oregonian needing hospital care.

Our message today is simple and direct: **COVID-19 vaccines save lives.**

The COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. They are the silver bullet that will end this pandemic – if we can vaccinate as many people as possible.

Now let's look at the major new research that was released today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

The CDC's COVID-19 hospitalization surveillance system tracks severe COVID-19 cases in Oregon and 13 other states. It found that among more than 7,000 patients age 65 and older from February through April of this year:

- The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were 91-96% effective in reducing the risk of hospitalization.
- And, the J&J vaccine was 84-85% effective in reducing the risk of hospitalization.

These data confirm the findings of earlier clinical vaccine trials that revealed a dramatically lower risk of hospitalization from COVID-19 among vaccinated people.

These findings are important for several reasons:

- First, they demonstrate that COVID-19 vaccines are working as well in the real world as they did under clinical trial conditions at preventing severe COVID-19.
- Second, there was no evidence of decreasing effectiveness over time.
- Third, they demonstrate that COVID-19 vaccines work exceptionally well in elderly adults and we believe they will work as well or better in younger people.

These findings— and our experience with COVID-19 here in Oregon — reaffirm that all three available vaccines are extremely effective shields against hospitalization and death from COVID-19.

While these data were collected before the Delta variant became the dominant variant in Oregon, we are confident that these estimates will remain very high even as the Delta variant circulates. We believe this because we have vaccine effectiveness data from several other countries demonstrating very high protection against hospitalization and death from the Delta variant.

Let me provide some key takeaways from July’s COVID-19 vaccine breakthrough report, released yesterday.

- Oregon has identified 4,196 vaccine breakthrough cases to date.
- The number of vaccine breakthrough cases remains very small when compared to the more than 2.3 million Oregonians who have completed their COVID-19 vaccination series.
- Overall, there were 12,541 total cases of COVID-19 reported during the month of July and 81% of these occurred in unvaccinated people. The proportion of vaccine breakthrough cases is expected to increase as transmission increases in the community and more people are vaccinated, and does not mean that vaccines are working less effectively.
- Of the 55 COVID-19-associated deaths reported in July, 91% were among people who were unvaccinated.

Show Slide

This slide further illustrates how vaccination is protecting people in Oregon from COVID-19 infection. This is a graph of the rate of new infections per 100,000 in Oregon per week in vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals.

The current rate for vaccinated individuals is less than 50 per 100,000 people per week. The rate for unvaccinated people is more than six-fold higher.

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Vaccination remains the best way to protect yourself against COVID-19 and to keep the virus from spreading among our loved ones, our friends and neighbors, and our communities.

Now let me speak briefly to the rapid spread of the Delta variant here in Oregon.

We estimate that the Delta variant now accounts for more than 80% of all new COVID-19 cases. It is now the dominant variant circulating in Oregon and nationwide. It is two to three times more infectious than early COVID-19 variants.

For unvaccinated individuals, the risk of COVID-19 has literally never been greater. We urge all people in Oregon who can be vaccinated to do so and to protect those who cannot, such as children under 12, by masking indoors, distancing and avoiding gatherings.

Vaccines are saving lives in Oregon every day. Please take the opportunity to get vaccinated.

Now, let me turn it over to Dr. Niskanen to discuss the impacts of this latest surge.

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