

Governor's news conference (Sept. 7, 2021)

**Dr. Dean Sidelinger, Health Officer and State Epidemiologist,
Oregon Health Authority Public Health Division**

Thank you, Governor Brown.

The Delta variant continues to ravage communities across Oregon. Our hospitals are scrambling to avoid being overtopped by record numbers of COVID-19 patients.

Daily cases and hospitalizations associated with COVID-19 have been hovering at or near pandemic highs over the past several weeks.

- Our most recent COVID-19 Weekly Report tallied 16,252 new cases, the eighth consecutive weekly increase. That is 13 times higher than the reported cases for the week ending July 4th.
- COVID-19 hospitalizations and intensive care unit admissions reached record highs last week before receding slightly.

But those numbers remain alarmingly high.

Our hospitals have reached the saturation point — where health systems are not able to provide care to everyone arriving at their doors.

That means fewer beds for anyone who experiences a medical incident — not just COVID-19, but because of other medical problems like a heart attack or injuries from a car crash. Needed surgeries and procedures are being delayed.

It is the crisis we all dread — and one that must do everything to avoid.

An overwhelming majority of the patients with COVID-19 filling these critically needed beds are unvaccinated.

I cannot say this anymore plainly: This is a crisis that is largely being driven by people who have not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19.

Unlike during the earlier days of the pandemic, we now have access to safe and highly effective vaccines. I urge everyone who is eligible for vaccination to take advantage of this life-saving opportunity for yourself, for your families and for your communities.

Our newest modeling offers some encouragement—a slowing of the growth of cases and hospitalizations in the coming weeks. But that is conditioned upon more adult Oregonians getting vaccinated and taking other protective steps such as wearing masks when in indoor public spaces, when we're outdoors among crowds, and reconsidering plans that put us or others at higher risk from getting COVID-19.

The decisions we make over the next few weeks will determine whether we plunge deeper into this crisis of care or we reverse this rising tsunami.

I recognize that the current COVID-19 outlook is a source of concern for parents of students returning to classrooms this fall.

OHA has been working closely with the Oregon Department of Education to ensure that our schools remain well protected against COVID-19. We are confident that the safety protocols Director Gill has outlined will achieve the delicate balance of promoting the safety of students and staff and will minimize the risk of catching the virus in school and bringing it home.

One of the most important tools we have in our fight to contain the virus is the availability of COVID-19 testing for students and staff.

Access to regular and reliable screening and testing can identify COVID-19 infections more quickly and help to slow transmission in K-12 settings.

These include:

- Diagnostic testing for students or staff who display symptoms of COVID-19 or who may have been exposed to the virus while at school. This free testing can help diagnose infection early and shorten quarantine periods.
- Weekly screening testing for unvaccinated K-12 staff. These tests are self-collected at home and are processed through a regional laboratory.
- Weekly screening testing of unvaccinated students through an opt-in program.

Because COVID-19 vaccines are so incredibly effective in reducing the risk of infection, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends screening only in unvaccinated individuals. Schools may choose to verify vaccination status, but this is not required, and all interested K-12 schools and students are welcome to enroll, regardless of vaccination status.

I encourage every school to participate in these important testing programs. Schools must register for the 2021-2022 school year even if they participated last year. Parents should encourage their children's schools to enroll.

This is critical to accomplishing our shared objective of ensuring that schools can reliably hold school in-person — every school day — for all students — all year long.

I want to conclude with a special thank you to my public health colleagues and community partners who continue their hard work

every day to help protect Oregonians from COVID-19 – despite being physically and emotionally exhausted. We have been battling this virus for over a year and a half — combating misinformation, investigating cases, linking people to much needed services, vaccinating Oregonians and so much more. Thank you.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the health care workers who continue to provide quality care to Oregonians — all in the face of exhaustion, delaying needed care because of capacity and in the face of immense losses they do not have time to fully grieve.

To all Oregonians who are ill, worried about sick loved ones, or grieving the loss of a loved one: My thoughts are with you.

To everyone who has taken the time and effort to get the vaccine — and now to wearing masks — thank you. All of you are taking steps to protect yourself and those around you and I am truly grateful. Thank you.

Once again Oregonians are rising to the challenge. To people who have not yet been vaccinated: Please make a plan and get vaccinated. You could save your life — or the life of a loved one. Thank you.

And with that, I will turn things back to Governor Brown.

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