

Oregon Health Authority Media Availability (January 7, 2022)

Dean E. Sidelinger, M.D., M.S.Ed., State Health Officer and State Epidemiologist

Thank you, Erica.

I'm Dr. Dean Sidelinger, health officer and state epidemiologist at Oregon Health Authority.

Once again, COVID-19 has regrouped and is on the march in Oregon. The highly contagious Omicron variant is driving an alarming spike in COVID-19 infections, virus-related hospitalizations and test positivity, that we have seen in recent days.

Today, OHA will report 10,451 new daily cases of COVID-19, a sobering reminder of the formidable challenge that lies ahead.

This is not the way any of us wanted to begin the new year. We are all tired of taking steps to fight this virus. We are anxious as we hear from more of our family and loved ones who are sick with — or were exposed to — COVID-19.

While the data is stark and discouraging — we all have tools to help protect ourselves, loved ones and neighbors — vaccinations and masks.

- As of yesterday, the seven-day average for new cases over the last month increased 373%.
- OHA has recorded new pandemic highs in daily cases every day this week. More than 9,700 cases were reported over the extended New Year's holiday weekend, another pandemic high.

- That percent positivity crested at a stupefying high 23.3% on Wednesday and hovers at an astonishingly high seven-day average of 19.5%.

COVID-19-related hospitalizations, which had stabilized over the past six weeks, are once again climbing, raising the ominous possibility that our hospitals — still feeling the effects of the Delta surge — may once again get swamped by another wave of illness.

- The COVID-19 Weekly Report recorded 290 hospitalizations — a 57% increase from the prior week. That followed a six-month low in hospitalizations, reported for the previous week.

Still, our hospitals are struggling to maintain the fragile balance between providing care for people who are ill with the virus and others needing medical care.

We have announced new measures to assist our hospitals in managing the anticipated surge.

They include:

- Deploying 500 National Guard members to support frontline medical workers
- Providing a crisis of care tool to hospitals to help clinicians make the difficult decision if there is not enough staff or equipment to provide life-saving care to every patient.
- Creating a surge tool of up to 1,000 additional clinicians to support nurse crisis response teams across the healthcare system.
- Extending clinical staffing for hospitals, long-term care facilities, and other congregate settings.

We must ensure that staffed hospital beds are ready and available to everyone who needs them.

Omicron is a potent threat to all of us.

While a person who gets sick with Omicron may be less likely to be hospitalized than if they were sick with the Delta variant, it *will* sicken many more people, at a much faster pace — thus increasing the number of people hospitalized. It *will* disrupt lives and livelihoods.

Unchecked, it *will* overburden our already exhausted health care workers and oversaturate our health care system.

Many more people will be sick or will need to help take care of a sick loved one or will be asked to stay home because of an exposure to someone with COVID-19. Many people will have to miss work — and we *will* see disruptions in the services we are used to.

The good news is that we are far better equipped to fight the virus in 2022 than we were even in 2021. We have expanded our vaccine capacity. Several mass vaccination sites are open. Opportunities for boosters are widely available.

We have significantly ramped up our testing capacity. This week the state began receiving some of the recently ordered 6 million COVID-19 Antigen Rapid Test kits, which will yield 12 million tests. The tests can produce results in 15 minutes.

These testing kits will be offered to people around the state in some of the communities most impacted by COVID-19 free of charge, so they can determine, at home, if they are carrying the virus, and take steps to prevent its spread, such as isolating at home, keeping distance from others, and wearing a mask.

We have adopted new policies to make our classrooms safer for teachers, students and staff. Director Gill will talk more about those changes.

We moved quickly to adopt the new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding isolation and quarantine to reflect what is known about the potential impacts of the Omicron variant.

The change is based on research that transmission occurs early during early illness, generally one to two days before onset of symptoms until 2 to 3 days after.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance recommends that a person who is positive should isolate for five days and, if they are without symptoms or symptoms are improving, they can leave isolation if they can continue to wear a mask for five days to reduce the risk of infecting others.

For unvaccinated people, or for people who have not yet received booster shots, the guidance calls for staying home after an exposure for a period of five days, followed by strict mask use for five more days.

This new guidance will shorten the period that people are asked to stay home with minimal increased risk in spreading the virus.

Anyone who has been exposed to the virus is urged to get tested five days afterward. People showing symptoms should limit contact with others until a negative test confirms no infection.

We are also making changes to case investigation and contact tracing. Earlier in the pandemic, case investigators and contact tracers made individual calls to provide isolation and quarantine guidance and to support people who have tested positive or been exposed to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.

During the current surge, case investigation and contact tracing cannot effectively slow the spread of disease.

Rather than call every person with COVID-19, OHA will create a COVID-19 Case Support Hotline for people who have tested positive, including with at-home tests, and those who have been exposed to someone with COVID-19. Public health can then focus on high-risk settings to reduce spread.

Callers can get information on isolation and quarantine, receive assistance with a mobile-friendly survey for those who have tested positive, and learn about available support resources.

This “opt-in” approach will help reach more people who need additional services or higher levels of support. It will also help address the burden on Oregon’s public health system by triaging calls that might normally go to local public health authorities.

2-1-1 remains the best resource for general COVID-19 questions, information about testing and access to vaccination appointments.

We can all do our part to blunt this newest surge by getting vaccinated, and then — if you are 5 months from your second Pfizer shot, 6 months from your second Moderna shot or two months from a Johnson & Johnson vaccine — by getting a booster shot.

The existing data, and the established science, show that if you are fully vaccinated and have received a booster shot, you are protected from getting COVID-19 and from being hospitalized.

If you are unvaccinated, consider this a red alert. You are in greater danger of getting the virus and of passing it along to others than at any time in the pandemic.



If you were ill with COVID-19 and have not yet been vaccinated, you cannot count on the acquired immunity to stave off the Omicron variant. This virus will find you.

The strong immune response you get from being fully vaccinated — followed by a booster shot — is the most effective protection against all variants of COVID-19, including the Omicron variant.

More than 3 million Oregonians have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Nearly 1.2 million have received a booster shot. Thank you to everyone who has made the choice to protect themselves, their families, their neighbors and communities, and have taken the time to get vaccinated, and then to get boosted.

Last month Governor Brown set a goal to get 1 million boosters by the end of January. Unfortunately, due to inclement weather and the holidays, traffic at the high-volume sites has lagged. But, despite those challenges, almost a quarter million Oregonians have gotten a booster shot since the end of last month.

Even if we do not reach our goal, every booster offers someone more protection — and helps protect their family and their loved ones.

I acknowledge that that this dire outlook is the last thing you want to hear as we toll another calendar year in the pandemic. We are tired of the virus, but the virus has not tired of us. Many of us are anxious and scared. We want to get to a time where COVID-19 isn't weighing on us.

We can blunt this latest surge by getting vaccinated, and then boosted when eligible, by wearing masks indoors and outdoors in crowded places, and by keeping our gatherings small.

Stay home if you're sick or know you were exposed to COVID-19.

Thank you to all of you who are taking these important steps to protect yourselves and your loved ones. Your collective efforts have saved thousands of lives.

To find out where you can get a COVID-19 vaccine go to:

www.getvaccinated.oregon.gov.

Get Ready. Get vaccinated. Get boosted.

And with that, I'll turn things over to Dr. Peter Graven for an update on the latest COVID-19 modeling.

Peter Graven, Ph.D, director of the Oregon Health & Science University Office of Advanced Analytics

Some hope:

Data is showing that Oregonians are indeed taking measures to prevent the spread of this virus. It will be imperative over the next few weeks that we stick with wearing masks and avoiding large indoor gatherings.

Anything we can do to flatten out the spread of infection over a longer period of time will free up health care resources for all Oregonians who need care in a hospital. That includes COVID-19 but it also includes people who need the hospital for heart attacks, motor vehicle accidents, strokes and everything else.

Spreading among vaccinated:

People who have done the right thing by getting vaccinated are still by and large protected from severe illness. However, they aren't nearly as protected from becoming infected. That means that vaccinated people can have a significant effect right now in reducing the spread and conserving hospital capacity by sticking with public health measures for the next few weeks.

Milder infection:

My model does account for the fact that the omicron variant still drives hospitalizations, but it tends to be less severe than previous virus variants.

That doesn't help with the all-at-once impact on hospital capacity. My model does account for the fact that average length of stay in the hospital tend to be shorter with less of a need for care in our intensive care units and the use of ventilators. Unfortunately, data from the East Coast show that the sheer number of infections will lead to a corresponding increase in all types of care including ICUs.

Colt Gill, Director, Oregon Department of Education

Thank you Dr. Graven.

Good morning everyone. We set a North Star for this school year to safely hold school in-person, all-day, every school day, for every student, all year long. It is our highest priority.

We believe most children learn better when taught in-person. We know children and families rely on schools to provide a caring and safe environment. And, many need access to a solid breakfast and a warm lunch that is provided at school. For parents and families, consistency

matters, and for many, school is a way to ensure parents can go to work and support their family.

Four months into the school year, in-person learning is facing its greatest obstacles. The Omicron variant is surging and will continue to infect thousands of people in Oregon over the next few weeks. And, COVID fatigue has set-in. We are tired of having our lives and our routines interrupted or impacted by masks, physical distancing, vaccinations, all the other protocols that have worked to keep our numbers low.

Like every other workforce — health care, the airline industry, professional sports, etc. — schools have been and will continue to be impacted by this Omicron surge. Our educators, aides, office staff, drivers, cooks, servers, custodians and school leaders have shown amazing grit throughout the pandemic. And, they have kept the promise of in-person learning this year. They have worked well beyond their normal hours. They have worked outside their normal roles. They have tested students and each other. They have provided comfort and care. They have been succeeding. And, it is taking a toll on them, as they live and move through the pandemic just like other families in Oregon — trying to make it all work.

They will keep this going because they know how important in-person learning is. We have seen some schools move temporarily to short-term distance learning and we will see that happen more over the next few weeks. The primary reason is that there are too many staff impacted by COVID-19 to be able to operate school in-person — they are either ill or quarantined. This will cause challenges for everyone in that school community. With short notice families will need to figure out childcare and online classes, some will lose time at work. Today's announcement

about shortened quarantines will help reduce the impact and hopefully prevent more closures.

There are two other things we can do to reduce the possibility of moving temporarily to short-term distance learning. The first happens at school. We must set our COVID fatigue aside and reteach, reestablish, and reemphasize all the layered mitigation protocols:

- Get vaccinated and boosted to avoid quarantines
- Wear properly fitting masks to limit spread
- Maintain physical distance
- Provide opportunity for frequent hand washing
- Even through the winter months, maintain good airflow and ventilation

Even with high community spread, consistently implementing these practices keeps COVID-19 from spreading in structured school environments. We have proven this, but we have to commit to it to ensure this works with the incredibly contagious Omicron variant.

Second, we need the support of the broader community. You can control community spread and reduce the number of cases that get introduced into our schools. First, get up-to-date on your vaccinations. Get the booster. Wear a mask whenever you are around people outside your household. These are the things you can do to help keep our school doors open for all of our children.

Look, we hear a lot about the Omicron variant causing less severe cases of COVID-19. I'm not a medical doctor, but I also have a couple of thoughts about this.

1. While the severity may be less — especially for those up-to-date with all their vaccinations; the community-wide impacts are as

significant as ever. Flights are being cancelled, restaurants are temporarily closing some evenings, games are being rescheduled, schools are moving online. None of this is related to any mandate. It is happening because too many people are falling ill to keep operations going. Let's come together to keep people healthy, if only to keep our schools operating in-person for our children.

2. Our schools match our communities. We serve everyone in our public schools. That means that we have children, teens, and adult staff that are more vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 than the general community. While most who contract the Omicron variant may do just fine after a few days or weeks of illness; others may be hospitalized, impacted for months, or even die. Wearing a mask, getting a shot –to me, those seem like small prices to pay for sparing a vulnerable neighbor, friend, or family member from a severe case of COVID-19.

Thank you for doing what you can to help us reach our North Star for kids this year. Let's keep our school doors open.

And, now we can take your questions.