

Governor's news conference (Sept. 28, 2021)

Rachael Banks, Public Health Director, Oregon Health Authority

Thank you, Governor Brown. I'm Rachael Banks, Public Health director at the Oregon Health Authority. This morning, I want to provide you additional details about who is eligible for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine booster that was approved last week, and how these booster doses are rolling out around the state.

The decision by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Sept. 22 to amend the emergency use authorization for Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine — which allows the use of a single booster dose for certain populations — was highly anticipated, and certainly welcome news as the Delta variant continues to ravage Oregon and the rest of the country.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices followed the FDA's decision with its own endorsement of the Pfizer booster on Sept. 23. Finally, the next day, the Western States Scientific Safety Review Workgroup made its own confirmation of the booster, and recommended its use to Governor Brown and the governors of Washington, California and Nevada.

It's important to note that the FDA and CDC decisions affect specific groups that are at higher risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19. They recommend the Pfizer booster six months after completing the Pfizer vaccine series for those who are:

- Age 65 and older;
- Living in a long-term care facility; and
- Ages 50-64 and with underlying medical conditions.

The Western States Scientific Safety Review Workgroup expanded on the federal recommendations, supporting use of the Pfizer booster after six months of completing the Pfizer vaccine series among people ages 18-64 who have underlying medical conditions, and who are in occupational or institutional settings that put them at higher risk of COVID-19 exposure and transmission. These include:

- Health care workers, first responders such as firefighters and police, and congregate care staff.
- Those who work in educational settings such as teachers, support staff and daycare workers.
- Food and agriculture workers.
- Manufacturing workers.
- Corrections workers.
- U.S. Postal Service workers.
- Public transit workers.
- Grocery store workers.

In short, people who were in phases 1A and 1B during Oregon’s roll-out of primary COVID-19 vaccinations last December and earlier this year are now eligible to receive the Pfizer booster if they want it, and they received their immunization at least six months ago

Remember, in Oregon, our Phase 1A and 1B prioritization included all patient-facing health care staff — such as food service and housekeeping staff at hospitals, not just medical workers. We included workers who treat high-risk patients in outpatient substance use treatment programs, those who provide non-emergency medical transportation or work in hospices. We included those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We adjusted our Phase 1A roll-out to make it concurrent, to simplify the process so all eligible workers would be eligible at once, instead of having to wait in a prioritized line.

Our expanded definitions and our revised schedule were intended to protect our most vulnerable residents and reduce inequities. I want to remind everyone who fits in these original categories and received a Pfizer vaccine more than six months ago — you are eligible today. Talk to your health care provider and consider getting a booster shot.

As a public health leader supporting OHA’s effort to end health inequities in Oregon by 2030, I am encouraged by the Western States Workgroup’s alignment with the CDC in acknowledging the effects of long-standing health and social inequities on risk of severe illness from COVID-19, particularly among our Asian, Black, Indigenous, People of Color and Tribal communities.

The Workgroup's recommendation that social determinants of vulnerability be included in the assessment of medical conditions that qualify individuals for booster doses will help ensure these communities that have so tragically shouldered an unfair burden during this pandemic are prioritized to receive the booster. Oregon is looking at how we take these factors into account so we can prevent our booster program from suffering the same inequities we've seen in the roll-out of the initial doses.

Now I'd like to touch briefly on the roll-out of the Pfizer booster and vaccine supply in Oregon.

At this time, the supply of the Pfizer vaccine in Oregon is strong — there are more than 800,000 doses of the Pfizer, Modern and Johnson & Johnson vaccines — including more than 400,000 Pfizer doses — available in inventories across the state. We estimate that approximately 300,000 people are currently eligible for a Pfizer booster. OHA and CDC are watching vaccine orders closely based on each site's reporting about their inventory and utilization. Using those criteria, we are able to maintain vaccination sites at a three- to four-week supply of vaccine — whether they're for boosters, first or second doses.

Vaccines continue to come from federally purchased supplies directly to vaccination provider sites, or, in some cases, from the Regional Vaccine Redistribution Hubs that OHA has set up to serve every part of the state.

As a result, we don't anticipate any challenges for people who qualify for and want to get the Pfizer booster — or for anyone who is currently unvaccinated who wants any of the doses of the three available vaccines. We continue to see good access for people seeking vaccination appointments or who simply want to drop in to get their shot.

The larger concern is ensuring the capacity of clinics, pharmacies, local public health, health systems and other vaccinators to manage the logistics of serving as vaccination sites, and ensuring access across the general population and focused settings to reach the people seeking vaccine doses when they want them. OHA's Vaccine Operations Team continues to engage with these vaccination sites, and is looking at whether staff brought into Oregon to cover the surge in hospitalizations could be maintained to add workforce capacity to our fall vaccination efforts.

We also are engaging with local public health authorities and community-based organizations to identify locations and potential operators for larger-scale vaccination sites, providing 500-2,000 doses a day. We want to site these in or very near neighborhoods that have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. We also are working with organizers to incorporate child-friendly services wherever possible, anticipating that there may be authorizations for ages 5-11 by sometime this fall.

So, if you are eligible and want to get the Pfizer booster, I encourage you to visit [GetVaccinated.Oregon.Gov](https://www.getvaccinated.oregon.gov) and find a vaccine clinic near you. If you're not yet eligible for the Pfizer booster — if you are among the high-risk groups but it hasn't been at least six months since completing your Pfizer vaccine series — we ask that you be patient and wait your turn. If you've completed the first and second doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or the single dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, congratulations! Even without a vaccine booster, you are still considered fully vaccinated and well protected from COVID-19.

Finally, I want to echo the words of CDC's director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, who emphasized that the Pfizer booster — while an important step in providing additional protection to the most vulnerable — is no replacement for continuing our work to help people who are unvaccinated get their first and second doses of the vaccines. As she told reporters last week: "We will not boost our way out of this pandemic."

Seventy-eight percent of Oregon adults have been vaccinated so far. That is an important step toward reaching the critical threshold of immunity we need to loosen COVID-19's grip on our state. But we can do even better and more equitably. We need everyone who has not yet been vaccinated to do so at their earliest opportunity. Getting vaccinated, along with continuing to wear masks, keeping our distance from others and avoiding gatherings, is — quite simply — our state's ticket out of this pandemic.

And with that I'll turn it back to Governor Brown.

Dr. Tom Jeanne, Deputy State Health Officer and Deputy State Epidemiologist

Thank you, Governor Brown.

The pandemic in Oregon appears to have reached its peak.

Daily infections and hospitalizations are slowly receding from the record highs that we experienced earlier in the month.

Our ability to sustain this welcome trend depends on more Oregonians getting vaccinated, on all of us continuing to wear masks in indoor public spaces and outdoors among crowds, and reconsidering plans that put us or others at high risk of getting COVID-19.

The recent data suggests that our collective efforts are having the desired effect:

- As of yesterday, our seven-day average of daily cases was 1,646. The same average on Sept. 1 was 2,200. We are seeing a corresponding drop in the percentage of positive tests, from 12% to 8.9% over the same period.
- Our most recent COVID-19 Weekly Report for the week ending Sept. 19, tallied 11,655 new cases, a 10% decline. That followed an 11% drop during the previous week and marked the third straight weekly decrease.
- COVID-19-related hospitalizations were slightly lower than the previous week. But COVID-19 related deaths increased by 23% from 120 to 148.

Thank you, Oregonians for once again, unselfishly, stepping up to turn back the rising tide of infection. Your collective effort has eased the stress on our hospitals across the state.

But despite the recent easing, we still have far too many COVID-19 patients occupying hospital beds: 866 statewide as of yesterday, which is hundreds more than our previous peak last November

We are recording more than 800 daily hospitalizations every day. Intensive Care admissions account for nearly 25% of that total.

Neither trend is sustainable and we all must continue to do our part to ensure that there are enough available beds for everyone who experiences a medical emergency or needs hospital care.

Our latest modeling report shows how fragile progress can be against this unrelenting virus.

The report shows that earlier this month, spread of the virus increased slightly. That was the result of a slow, but discernable increase in high-risk behaviors, and a slackening adherence to the public health protocols that have proven to be effective.

We cannot drop our guard and risk a resurgence that could overwhelm our health care system — our health care workers and resources have been severely strained for far too long.

Director Banks earlier outlined the steps our state is taking to quickly and efficiently make booster shots available to everyone who needs one. I urge everyone who meets the criteria to receive a booster dose to talk to your health care providers about getting one.

If you are not eligible for a Pfizer booster or you have received a Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccine, there is no need to worry.

The data show, and the supporting science indicates, that all of the available vaccines provide excellent protection against serious illness and death from COVID-19.

We must not lose sight of our primary goal, which is to vaccinate as many adult Oregonians as possible.

The Delta variant remains a formidable threat to all of us and most especially to people who have not been vaccinated, and who still account for an overwhelming majority of the COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths in Oregon.

According to our latest weekly breakthrough case report, the rate of COVID-19 in unvaccinated people is approximately four times higher than in vaccinated people.

You may ask why, if the vaccine is working, are some vaccinated people getting sick?

Unless a vaccine is 100% effective, so long as the virus is circulating, some vaccinated people will get sick. And the more vaccinated people there are, the more breakthrough cases we can expect to see.

The increasing number is primarily an indication that we're seeing more vaccinated people.

The vast majority of the breakthrough cases in vaccinated people result in either mild symptoms or none at all.

That's the good news. Here's the bad news: If you are unvaccinated, you have never been more vulnerable to being sickened by the virus, passing the virus on to your loved ones, getting seriously ill or dying from COVID-19. If you are unvaccinated you are risking the health of your family, your loved ones and everyone you encounter while infected.

The COVID-19 vaccines are saving lives in Oregon every day.

More than 2.7 million Oregonians have had at least one dose of the vaccine and nearly 2.5 million have completed a vaccine series.

To those who have taken the effort and made a plan to get vaccinated, thank you.

And now I will turn things back over to Governor Brown.

-###-