

Talking Points for 02-11-22 Media Gaggle

Thank you, Erica, and thanks to everyone who is joining us this morning.

We wanted to meet with you following our Monday announcement that we will lift the mask requirement for indoor spaces by March 31, and for schools *on* March 31.

Just because the mask requirement is going away, doesn't mean masks are going away.

Many Oregonians are still at higher risk and may continue wearing masks. Those who are unvaccinated. Those who are immunocompromised. Those at higher risk for complications. Those who live with someone in one of these categories.

Many may still feel anxious and want to continue wearing a mask in indoor crowded settings. We should all go forward with patience and grace as we move into the spring – and support each other's decisions.

Director Gill can answer your questions about how our schools can prepare to implement masking changes and how parents and local communities can get ready. Dr. Graven can address your questions about the latest COVID-19 modeling and what lies ahead.

But first, let me briefly review the present COVID-19 situation in Oregon.

The worst of the Omicron surge appears to be behind us. The virus is losing momentum, but we are not yet free of its grip.

Newly diagnosed daily cases of COVID-19 have fallen 71% from the peaks we experienced only 3 weeks ago. Test positivity, while still alarmingly high, is declining.

Daily COVID-19-related hospitalizations appear to have crested in late January – at a level just below the Delta peak – and are steadily subsiding. On Monday, we reported 1,072 daily hospitalizations; today we are reporting 947, following 21 consecutive days of 1,000 or higher.

My thoughts go out to all of our loved ones and neighbors who are still battling this virus.

This is a welcome trend. But we are far from out of danger.

Our hospitals are still relying on about 1,300 National Guard members and nearly 1,200 medical professionals that Oregon has had to bring in from other states to provide needed patient care.

As infections continue to slow, we anticipate that daily hospitalizations will remain high for several more weeks before returning to pre-Omicron levels.

Recall that when we first sounded the Omicron alarm last December, credible projections called for hospitalizations to be more than twice as high as we've experienced.

Thankfully, we never realized that dreaded breaking point.

Why? Because Oregonians stepped up, as they have throughout the course of this pandemic. Thank you. You got vaccinated and then boosted. Thank you. You wore masks, restricted your gatherings, and avoided unnecessary travel. Thank you.

In short, your adherence to these prevention measures blunted this latest surge. Your efforts have saved lives. Thank you.

Our emergence from the Omicron onslaught depends on our continued diligence over these next two months. We cannot risk squandering our hard-earned progress, when a return to normal life is finally, and at long last, within our reach.

COVID-19 will not be gone, but we will not have the profound impacts on our daily lives that it still has. That is when we can live with COVID-19.

And with that, we are happy to take your questions.

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