

OHA media briefing, November 23, 2021

Oregon Health Authority Director Patrick Allen:

Good morning. I'm Patrick Allen, Director of the Oregon Health Authority. I'm joined today by Colt Gill, Director of the Oregon Department of Education, and Dr. Dean Sidelinger, our State Health Officer and State Epidemiologist.

We will update you on the latest developments in the COVID-19 pandemic and share information about new Test to Stay protocols in our schools that will allow students and staff to conduct in-person instruction as safely as possible, while reducing the burden of quarantine on students and their families, teachers and school administrators.

But I want to start today, with a major policy announcement.

OHA is lifting the requirement for outdoor mask wearing in crowded settings. This rule was implemented back in August at the peak of this most recent surge.

This decision, which takes effect immediately, reflects the overall progress we have seen on the COVID-19 front here in Oregon. And it is a testament to the perseverance of all Oregonians in faithfully adopting the public health interventions we know are effective in containing the spread of the disease.

OHA is taking this action within its legal authority and after close consultation with Governor Brown and her advisors.

This new mask guidance should not keep people who want to continue wearing masks in all settings from doing so.

The use of face coverings provides significant protection for people who are not vaccinated. Masks also provide additional protection against the small risk of infection that exists for vaccinated people.

They protect the person wearing the mask — as well as those around them.

Mask wearing for people who are unvaccinated, for the elderly, for immunocompromised people, for people at higher risk of contracting the disease and for people who are living with someone in one of those categories, **is still strongly recommended.**

And mask wearing **is still recommended** for people who are in crowded outdoor settings for an extended period.

In a few moments, Director Gill will talk about how the new mask requirements will be implemented in schools around the state.

Recall where we were when the mask regulations were first implemented last summer. Our daily cases were numbering in the four-digits and our hospital census was more than double what is today.

We took decisive measures. And, as has been the case over the course of this pandemic, Oregonians resoundingly responded. Together we have managed to turn back the tsunami of new infections that very nearly swamped our health care system.

Our collective adherence to these life-saving measures has spared Oregon from the extreme impacts experienced in other U.S. states. Oregon is the fourth lowest in cases and sixth lowest in deaths nationally.

Over the past six weeks we have continued to see a slow but steady decline in daily cases and hospitalizations, consistent with recent modeling projections.

Our seven-day moving average of new cases as of yesterday was 822. On Sept. 1, in the teeth of this newest surge, that average was 2,285. That's a 64% decrease.

OHA's most recent COVID-19 Weekly Report noted a 12% drop in new cases for the week ending Sunday, Nov. 14, although that decline has been slowing in recent days. That followed a 16% decline the previous week, when OHA reported the fewest weekly cases since mid-July.

Likewise, the number of patients with COVID-19 who are in hospitals, along with the number of Intensive Care Unit patients have declined — falling from a peak of 1,178 on September 1, to 404 as of today.

Also, Oregon's total population vaccination percentage has grown with the recent authorization for children aged 5 through 11 to receive the Pfizer pediatric vaccine.

Eight in 10 adult Oregonians have now received at least a single dose of the vaccines available to protect us from COVID-19.

- Oregon ranks 19th among states for the percentage of population who have received at least one dose of a vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Oregon ranks 19th among all states and the District of Columbia in the administration of booster doses.

As of today, more than 56,000 5-through-11-year-olds have received at least one vaccine dose, which accounts for nearly 17% of all children in that age range.

Although the COVID-19 landscape is markedly improved, we are not yet at a point where we can consider relaxing the guidance on wearing masks in indoor public settings.

The Delta variant remains a significant threat to all of us and especially to the one in five Oregonians who are vulnerable to the disease.

While the outlook has improved, we are still experiencing daily cases and hospitalizations at or near the peaks of previous COVID-19 surges. We are still dealing with limited hospital capacity for all patients. Just yesterday, we announced the extension of approximately 1,000 health professionals to support overburdened hospitals.

Unvaccinated people continue to account for an overwhelming majority of our COVID-19 hospitalizations. Our most recent breakthrough case data indicates that unvaccinated people are four and a half times more likely to contract the virus.

And we continue to see a concerning pattern of COVID-19 spread throughout the state, with the heaviest concentrations found in counties with lagging vaccination rates.

On Friday, as you know, the FDA approved booster shots for people 18 and older. That means if you are more than six months removed from a second dose of the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines or two months beyond the single-dose Johnson & Johnson — you are eligible for — and you should strongly consider getting — the additional protection afforded by a booster shot.

It's especially important for people who are 50 or older to get a booster, as well as people who live in long-term care facilities, work in

jobs that put them at high risk of exposure or who have experienced health inequity, such as people of color or members of a tribe.

I want to emphasize that the existing vaccines provide substantial protection against the virus.

So, you may ask, why are you recommending that I get a booster? It's because immunity can wane over time and the additional dose can provide sometimes greater protection than the initial dose.

Also, even though you're at low risk of getting infected, if you do get the disease, you can pass it onto to others who are unvaccinated, or someone who is elderly or someone who is immunocompromised.

In these early stages, we may need to show some patience in scheduling with a vaccine provider as they ramp up to meet the new demand.

Over the holidays it is especially important that we maintain the vigilance that has served us so well. The decisions we make over the next several weeks will determine whether we can continue the progress we're experiencing now, or whether we fall deeper into the grip of this latest surge.

We can be heartened that the arriving holidays are likely to look more like 2019 than 2020.

But there are measures you can take to protect yourself and the people around you.

- This holiday, you're at less risk if you're vaccinated and if you get a booster when the time is right.

- Smaller gatherings are less risky than large gatherings, especially indoors.
- Wear a mask if you're indoors with people who may not be vaccinated, especially older adults, or if you're around people who may be immunocompromised, or people with higher risk of complications from COVID-19.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the sad milestone of Oregon's 5,000th COVID-19 related death, which was surpassed yesterday.

Each death represents a hole in someone's life that will never be filled. Too many Oregonians will see empty chairs around their holiday dinner table, making this tragic milestone even more heartbreaking.

Each death represents lost love, laughter and memories for families and friends.

My sadness is only compounded by the knowledge that nearly all the recent COVID-19 related deaths could have been prevented by vaccines, which remain our best protection against serious illness and death.

I strongly urge every eligible Oregonian to get vaccinated if you have not done so, and to get a booster shot as soon as you can.

Do it for yourselves and for your loved ones. Do it for your neighbors and for your colleagues. Do it for your communities and for all Oregonians. Getting vaccinated, and then getting a booster shot, are important steps in our journey to return to normal.

To everyone who has taken the time and effort to get the vaccine — and for the people who will soon take advantage of a COVID-19 booster — thank you.

I wish everyone a safe and healthy Thanksgiving. And now I'll turn things over to Director Gill.