

HEALTH ADVISORY:

Increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations due to emergence of the Omicron variant and updated isolation and quarantine guidance from the CDC.

December 29, 2021

This document will be updated as new information becomes available.

St. Louis County Department of Public Health (DPH) is now using 4 types of documents to provide important information to medical and public health professionals, and to other interested persons:

Health Alerts convey information of the highest level of importance which warrants immediate action or attention from Missouri health providers, emergency responders, public health agencies, and/or the public.

Health Advisories provide important information for a specific incident or situation, including that impacting neighboring states; may not require immediate action.

Health Guidances contain comprehensive information pertaining to a particular disease or condition, and include recommendations, guidelines, etc. endorsed by DPH.

Health Updates provide new or updated information on an incident or situation; can also provide information to update a previously sent Health Alert, Health Advisory, or Health Guidance; unlikely to require immediate action.

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FROM: Dr. Faisal Khan, Acting Director
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SUBJECT: Increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations due to emergence of the Omicron variant and updated isolation and quarantine guidance from the CDC

COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations are increasing at a rate faster than any other point in the pandemic. This rapid increase is likely fueled by the emergence of the Omicron variant. The pace of community transmission is particularly concerning given the relatively low vaccination rates in St. Louis County and emerging data about the risk of infection in children. The purpose of this advisory is to inform the public of the risk of the Omicron variant and the updated guidance from the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) on how to best protect themselves in this new environment.

COVID-19 is spreading unchecked in St. Louis County. As of 12/28, 712 people are being diagnosed each day, a 77% increase compared to the week before. The seven-day positivity rate among St. Louis County residents receiving PCR testing is 12.8% and rising rapidly, suggesting that the rate of transmission is increasing, and many infections are going undetected. Given expected transmission during holiday gatherings, this number is likely to continue to rise sharply into mid-January. Residents are currently at the highest risk of exposure to COVID-19 than they have ever been.

This past week, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) confirmed the presence of the Omicron variant in the St. Louis region. Evidence from other areas with earlier Omicron spread suggests that we should expect this dramatic increase in new infections to surpass our already alarmingly high rate of disease.

This increase in transmission is further exacerbated by the relatively low vaccination rates and low uptake of mitigation measures in St. Louis County. Currently, about 59% of St. Louis County residents are fully vaccinated – this is not high enough to stop community transmission, particularly against the Omicron variant. The latest guidance from the CDC is that two doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines are 35% effective against COVID-19 infection while a booster dose increase the vaccine effectiveness to 75% (1). The vaccine continues to protect against severe disease, hospitalization, and death. About 75% of recent COVID-19 infection and hospitalization in St. Louis County are in unvaccinated people.

Hospitalizations are also rising. This week, the Pandemic Task Force reported an average of 103 new admissions for COVID-19 each day (2), the highest since January 2021. Some early evidence suggests that Omicron causes less severe disease for each individual who gets sick. However, the drastic increase in transmissibility means that it will infect far more people at any time than previous variants. Even if a small percent of these people gets severely ill, it means that we could see far more people hospitalized for COVID-19 than ever before. This could overwhelm our local hospital system, which is already struggling to cope with our existing COVID case load and a simultaneous increase in other respiratory illnesses. Too many people in the St. Louis region are hospitalized every day from complications due to COVID-19, and regrettably, St. Louis County residents are dying from COVID-19 every day.

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Another alarming trend concerns pediatric hospitalizations. New York City had a four-fold increase in pediatric hospitalizations over the first three weeks in December (3). About half of those hospitalized were under 5 years old and ineligible for the vaccine. If this trend emerges in St. Louis County, it would be devastating. Thus far, only 21% of children 5-11 years old have been fully vaccinated.

DPH is particularly concerned about the risk to children living in North County, only about 7.5% of whom are fully vaccinated. With fewer public places such as businesses, stores, and schools requiring masking, St. Louis County children are at significant risk of COVID-19 infection and possibly hospitalization. Pediatric hospital capacity is far lower than adult hospital capacity, and even a small increase in admissions will drastically decrease the ability of local health systems to treat other conditions.

Layer as many evidence-based measures as you can to protect yourself and those around you who may be vulnerable to severe disease and to preserve hospital capacity:

- Vaccination - Vaccinated and boosted individuals have less severe disease. Make an appointment to get a vaccine or a booster at revivestl.com.
- Masking, social distancing, good ventilation, reducing the number of people at social gatherings, and proper hand hygiene can prevent transmission. If possible, wear a well-fitting surgical mask or an N95 mask instead of a cloth mask. Implementing these interventions in all public spaces such as businesses, stores, and schools make these environments safer for everyone.
- Testing, isolation, and quarantine - if you have any symptoms, isolate until you can get tested and remain isolated until you get the results of your test.

Given the high level of community transmission, it is very likely that you will be exposed to COVID-19 in the coming weeks. If you test positive or are exposed to COVID-19, follow CDC isolation and quarantine protocols.

Updated Isolation and Quarantine Guidance from the CDC

The CDC has recently released updated guidance on isolation and quarantine.

DPH will implement this guidance as of Wednesday, December 29th. Below is a summary of the updated recommendations:

1. **Isolation** (separating yourself from others if you have COVID-19) – if you test positive for COVID-19, isolate at home for at least 5 days regardless of your vaccination status. After 5 days, if you have no symptoms or your symptoms are resolving, you can leave your home as long as you continue to wear a well-fitting mask while around others at all times. If you have a fever, isolate at home until your fever is resolved without medication. DPH also recommends that you get an antigen test on Day 5 if feasible to confirm that you are not highly infectious. DPH also recommends that you think critically about the risk of the people you will have contact with after you test positive. Avoid unmasked contact with unvaccinated people, children, older people, and those with significant immunocompromising conditions.

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2. **Quarantine** (separating yourself from others if you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19) – recommendations for asymptomatic close contacts of someone with COVID-19 vary by vaccination status:
 - A. If you: completed the primary series of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine over 6 months ago and are not boosted OR completed the primary series of J&J over 2 months ago and are not boosted OR are unvaccinated:
 - Stay home for 5 days (quarantine). After that, continue to wear a well-fitting mask around others for 5 additional days.
 - If you absolutely cannot quarantine, you must strictly wear a well-fitting mask for 10 days.
 - Test on day 5, if possible.
 - B. If you: have been boosted OR completed the primary series of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine within the last 6 months OR completed the primary series of J&J vaccine within the last 2 months:
 - You are not required to quarantine.
 - Wear a well-fitting mask around others for 10 days.
 - Test on day 5, if possible.

DPH also recommends that you think critically about the risk of the people you will have contact with after your exposure. Avoid unmasked contact with unvaccinated people, children, older people, and those with significant immunocompromising conditions.

Regardless of vaccination status, if you develop symptoms at any time, get tested and stay home. If you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 and develop any upper respiratory symptoms, you should assume you have COVID-19 and follow the above guidance, even if you are unable to get a test.

References:

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s1227-isolation-quarantine-guidance.html>
2. <https://www.facebook.com/StLouisMetropolitanPandemicTaskForce>
3. https://health.ny.gov/press/releases/2021/docs/2021-12-24_health_advisory.pdf