

## **Letter to the Community: August 25, 2021**

Hello Thurston County! We are seeing the highest transmission rates we have seen in Thurston County since the pandemic began. Our hospitals are experiencing significant strain as more cases of COVID-19 in the community lead to more hospitalizations and deaths among people who have not yet become fully vaccinated. I am getting questions from people in our community about what they can do to stay safe.

We are fortunate to have three safe and effective vaccines which are excellent at preventing severe disease and COVID-19 related deaths as well as reducing the risk of infection. Getting vaccinated when you are eligible is one important way to stay safe. Other essential protective measures include masking in indoor spaces where non-household members are present, maintaining a distance of six feet or more between yourself and non-household members where possible, avoiding nonessential travel and large gatherings. I know that even though we are dealing with a much more transmissible variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus if we wear masks indoors, keep our distance, and get vaccinated when we are eligible, we can do our part to bring the pandemic to an end.

### **What are the new masking rules that took effect on August 23, 2021?**

The new [masking order](#) signed by the Secretary of Health requires everyone over age 5 in Washington State to wear a mask anywhere someone outside their household is present or when in a place that is accessible to others outside of their household. Children between the ages of 2 and 4 are strongly recommended to wear masks with close adult supervision. It is not recommended that children under age 2 wear masks. People who have a medical condition or disability that prevents them from wearing a face covering are exempt. Masks are not required outside but are strongly recommended in crowded outdoor spaces. Masks are not required while working alone indoors, when fully vaccinated in select work areas, actively engaging in sports, actively eating or drinking, at small private gatherings, or while sleeping.

### **What can you tell me about the third dose of COVID-19 vaccines?**

Great question! The FDA authorized a third dose of an mRNA vaccine (Pfizer or Moderna) for people with moderate to severe immunosuppression. The vaccine may be administered 28 days or more after completion of the two-dose series and be the same vaccine type as the original series. This includes people receiving active treatment for cancer, are on medications that suppress the immune system including high dose steroids or people taking medications to prevent rejection of an organ or stem cell transplant, who have had a stem cell transplant within 2 years, have moderate or severe primary immunization syndrome or who have uncontrolled HIV.

This third dose is being offered to people with moderate to severe immunosuppression because people with this level of immunosuppression may not generate the same immune response to the COVID-19 vaccines as non-immune compromised people do and are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. The goal of this third dose is to improve the response immunosuppressed people have to the initial vaccine series. This only applies to people who received an mRNA vaccine.

We are awaiting data and recommendations on the Janssen vaccine booster dose. The Janssen vaccine is intended to boost the immune systems response after protection has waned over time. Booster doses are in the planning stages for people eight months after completion of a vaccine series. We are expecting more information when the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) meets to

discuss this at the end of August. Thurston County and other vaccine providers are planning now to offer booster doses this fall.

Read more about the third dose here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations/immuno.html>

Read more about booster doses here: <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s0818-covid-19-booster-shots.html>

**How long do I need to wait to get a COVID-19 vaccine if I've had COVID-19, been ill recently, or received another type of vaccine, such as a flu or shingles shot?**

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines state that people who have recently been infected with COVID-19 may receive vaccination after their infectious period is over and symptoms have improved. People who are in quarantine must finish their quarantine before seeking vaccination to avoid unintentionally spreading COVID-19 to healthcare workers and other community members. As with all other vaccines, it is recommended that people who are acutely ill experience improvement in their illness before getting vaccinated. CDC has updated their interim COVID-19 vaccination guidance and there is no minimum time recommended between COVID-19 vaccines and other vaccines. This means that children getting their back to school vaccines can get vaccinated for COVID-19 at the same visit if they are eligible. So, you can get your flu shot and your COVID-19 vaccine at the same time.

**My healthcare provider keeps asking me to get vaccinated every time I see them. Are they getting paid to do this?**

The short answer is no. The COVID-19 vaccine is provided for free to providers across the country and the vaccine in Washington State must be provided at no cost to patients. Because there are costs associated with vaccine storage and administration, some facilities may bill insurance an administration fee. For people without insurance the administration fee is covered by a Federal Government program. You can learn more here:

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/COVID19/VaccineInformation/VaccineCost#heading67661>

**I am hearing different things about the COVID-19 vaccine and fertility, pregnancy, and breast feeding. Can you clarify this for me and for the public?**

There has been no evidence the COVID-19 vaccine impacts fertility in men or women. Studies have shown there is no impact on sperm count or function. Thousands of people have become pregnant after one or more doses of a vaccine. A study of people seeking in vitro fertilization (IVF) did not find a difference in the success rate between people who were vaccinated, had previous COVID-19 infection, or who were neither vaccinated nor previously infected. We do know that pregnant people are at significantly increased risk of severe disease and poor outcomes if they become infected. Data is more limited on breastfeeding. We also know that maternal antibodies can be passed through breastmilk to infants and can offer some protection, this includes antibodies induced by COVID-19 vaccination. There has been no evidence of adverse impacts on infants from maternal vaccination.

To learn more about COVID-19 vaccination and fertility, visit: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/planning-for-pregnancy.html>

To learn more about COVID-19 and pregnancy and breast feeding, visit:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations/pregnancy.html>

Great questions everyone! I hope you all stay safe and healthy.

Wishing you the best of health,

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH

Health Officer, Thurston County