Loudoun County, Virginia

NEWS RELEASE

Six Things to Know About the Delta Variant and Why Masks Are So Important Now

Over the past few weeks, public health experts and the news media have published a lot of information about the Delta variant of the virus that causes COVID-19. It can be difficult to understand what you need to know and how this information affects you, your family and the greater Loudoun County community.

In addition, some are wondering why Loudoun County and other entities are once again recommending or requiring face masks when nearly 60% of Loudoun's total population is fully vaccinated, including more than 72% of Loudoun's adult population. While our community has made great progress in getting vaccinated , the transmission of COVID-19 has increased sharply in recent weeks in our county and the region.

The most recent guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and the Loudoun County Health Department is based on the latest scientific studies and trends observed as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve. Below are six things that all of us should know about the Delta variant and current mask requirements and recommendations.

1. **The Delta Variant is More Contagious.** The CDC has reported that the Delta variant of the coronavirus is nearly twice as contagious as the previous variants we faced earlier in the pandemic. In addition, the Delta variant appears to cause more severe illness in unvaccinated people than the previous strains caused. Unvaccinated people who are infected with the Delta variant are more likely to be hospitalized than people who were infected by the original virus stains, including younger people.

2. **Vaccinated People Can Still Spread the Virus and Test Positive for COVID-19.** As the CDC and others continue to study this disease, we are learning more about how the virus spreads. COVID-19 vaccines are effective. However, a small percentage of people who are fully vaccinated will still get COVID-19 if they are exposed to the virus that causes it. These are called "breakthrough" infections. VDH reports that up to 10% of vaccinated people may become infected. While fully vaccinated people who become infected appear to be infectious for a shorter period of time and have less severe illness that does not require hospitalization, they can still spread the virus to others. These data show us that vaccination for everyone remains a critical step in ending the pandemic and wearing masks by both vaccinated and unvaccinated people also remains an important mitigation measure.

3. **Unvaccinated People Remain at the Greatest Risk.** The CDC reports that the greatest risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus is from unvaccinated people. In addition, unvaccinated people are at the greatest risk of suffering from severe COVID-19 symptoms and are more likely to be hospitalized when infected with the virus, particularly the Delta variant. VDH

reports that the vast majority of people currently being hospitalized with severe COVID-19 illness are unvaccinated individuals (97% of hospitalizations). This is why the single more important tool in protecting yourself, your family and the community from COVID-19 is a COVID-19 vaccine. Loudoun County continues to encourage anyone 12 years and older who has not yet received a vaccine to get vaccinated as soon as possible. You can find vaccination locations near you by visiting loudoun.gov/covid19vaccine. More than 350 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine have been given in the Unites States so far. The vaccine is proven to be safe and effective against the virus, including the Delta variant.

4. **Face Masks Remain an Important Tool in Preventing the Spread of COVID-19.** Until more people are vaccinated, mask wearing remains an important tool to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Cases are rapidly spreading in the National Capital Region and throughout Virginia. To maximize protection and prevent the possible spread of the virus to others, the CDC now recommends that everyone—both vaccinated and unvaccinated people—wear masks while indoors in public within localities experiencing "substantial" or "high" levels of community transmission of the virus. Loudoun County is currently experiencing a "substantial" level of transmission, so out of an abundance of caution, the county is following the CDC recommendations. Loudoun County now requires everyone to wear masks inside county-owned and -operated facilities. Additionally, the Loudoun County Health Department encourages everyone to wear masks in all public indoor settings, such as grocery stores, gyms, restaurants, and shopping centers, regardless of their mask requirements, as long as Loudoun remains in "substantial" or "high" transmission. Rest assured: the county is closely monitoring the ever-evolving pandemic. If the level of community transmission decreases, or new guidance is issued by the CDC and VDH, the county will evaluate the new information and adjust mask requirements as warranted.

5. **Wearing Masks is Very Important for People with Weakened Immune Systems.** The CDC encourages everyone who has a weakened immune system due to age or an underlying medical condition, or anyone who lives with a person who has a weakened immune system, to wear a mask, regardless of the level of the virus transmission in the community. These individuals are at increased risk for severe disease.

6. **What You Can Do to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19.** The two most important tools we now have to slow the spread of COVID-19 and protect people from the disease are vaccination and masks. If you have not done so already, get a COVID-19 vaccine for yourself and eligible members of your family. When the vaccine is approved for children under age 12, get your kids vaccinated as soon as possible. In addition, wear a face mask in indoor public settings that covers your nose and mouth, even if you are already vaccinated. If everyone does their part, face masks will help slow the level of transmission in our community. In addition to getting vaccinated and wearing a mask, VDH also recommends continuing to stay 6 feet away from people who do not live in your household, covering your coughs and sneezes, washing your hands frequently, cleaning regularly, staying home when sick, avoiding contact with sick people, and knowing the signs and symptoms of COVID-19. You should also get tested if you're symptomatic, or if potentially exposed to COVID-19, regardless of your vaccination status. Learn more about protecting yourself and your family on the VDH website.

Given what we know about the Delta variant and the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine and masks, Loudoun County is applying all prevention strategies available to slow the spread of the disease. It will take each of us doing our part to reverse the current trend in new infections and help bring an end to the pandemic as quickly as possible.

Learn more about COVID-19 in Loudoun County, including links to data and vaccination information, by visiting loudoun.gov/coronavirus. If you have questions about the virus and vaccination, call 703-737-8300 or send an email to health@loudoun.gov.

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