

HOT TOPIC #54: August 12, 2021

COVID-19 updates from San Juan County around subjects on the minds of islanders

Surging Cases: The Islands' New Reality

Fourteen new COVID cases were reported in San Juan County on August 10th. While 11 of these cases were tied to two household clusters, this is still an alarming number.

The number of hospital beds devoted to COVID patients in Washington is doubling about every 10 days. This current surge is beginning to impact our access to advanced medical care.

It is time to rethink our understanding of COVID in the islands and beyond.

The Delta variant is spreading rapidly across the world, the United States, Washington, and San Juan County. It is here. Recent local cases have come via travel, hosting visitors, attending large events, or undetermined causes. Islanders should assume that if they spend time indoors and in proximity of unmasked individuals, that they will eventually be exposed.

While the exact science around the severity and infectiousness of the Delta variant is far from complete, we have a good understanding of the basic situation. This new strain of COVID is highly transmissible and is behaving in ways not seen in previous versions of the disease. The risk to our community, especially for those who are unvaccinated is real and significant.

Despite this new risk, vaccinated individuals should approach COVID as a disease to be wary of, but not to live in mortal fear of. Some vaccinated individuals will become sick, but the vaccine is tremendously effective at preventing serious illness. Those who have made the choice to be vaccinated should continue to feel extremely confident in their decision and their level of protection.

Those who remain unvaccinated should be far more concerned. The unvaccinated are more likely to become infected and the risk of severe illness and hospitalization is many times greater. The exact numbers are shifting rapidly, but to date about 5.4% of WA residents infected with COVID end up in the hospital, and about 1.2% of WA residents infected with COVID die. As just a very rough measure, if one were to assume that all the approximately 4,200 San Juan County residents who remain unvaccinated are eventually infected with COVID, about 225 of them may end up in the hospital and 50 of them will die. Remember that nearly 1400 of those 4,200 unvaccinated residents are children who are not yet able to receive the COVID-10 vaccine and are relying on the community around them to protect them.

The bottom line is that a far more infectious strain of COVID is in our community and we should expect that case numbers will continue to increase dramatically.

So, what comes next given current trends?

- Impacts to our public health and regional healthcare system will become more severe, potentially limiting access to advanced care for all ailments.
- A very small but predictable percentage of unvaccinated individuals will continue to end up hospitalized with COVID. About 20% of those unvaccinated individuals who end up in the hospital will die from the disease.
- The previous mandatory masking order for inside San Juan County businesses will be reinstated as of 5pm on Friday August 13th. This is being done primarily to do our part to relieve the strain on our healthcare system.
- Those who choose to remain unvaccinated will need to be extraordinarily cautious to ensure their safety.
- Given the massive and preventable surge in cases, social and regulatory pressure on those who choose to remain unvaccinated will increase.

- Parents of children 11 and under will continue to await news about new approvals for vaccine that will enable them to vaccinate their children.
- Local public health and healthcare providers will struggle to keep up with demand for testing, disease surveillance, and routine care.

What should we as islanders be doing?

- First off, it is totally reasonable and probably healthy for vaccinated islanders to feel frustration that we're in this position. It didn't have to be this way, but national vaccination rates never reached a level that would stamp out the disease.
- Mask up when in public indoors. Think of it as doing a thankless and immeasurable favor for the public health and healthcare system staff whose ongoing capacity to support this crisis is stretched to its breaking point.
- Be thoughtful with your socializing and travel. We're not advocating full lock down but be smart and moderate in your interactions.
- Businesses should look extremely carefully at all approaches to ensure a fully vaccinated workforce. Remember that vaccinated close contacts of a positive case are not subject to the 14-day quarantine requirement, but unvaccinated close contacts of a positive case are.
- Work to keep anxiety and anger at bay. This needless surge is immeasurably disheartening and we're all exhausted but keeping a sense of perspective and prioritizing both physical and mental health is key.
- Look for creative ways to build a culture that even more strongly encourages vaccination. Some businesses are choosing to only serve vaccinated individuals, many who have suffered from COVID are speaking up to share their experiences, and more and more people are not choosing to sit quietly with their frustrations as we suffer through an avoidable case spike. Only through changing the dialog can we change the outcome.

At this point, the strain on our healthcare system is increasing dramatically and further impacts are unavoidable. Yet, with quick collective action we can limit the damage, hit the peak of the surge sooner, and start getting back to some version of normal.

HOSPITALIZATION COUNTS

● Hospitalizations ● Incomplete — Hospitalizations (7 day avg.) — Incomplete (7 day avg.)

