

HOT TOPIC #57: December 7, 2021

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

The New Omicron Variant and What it May Mean for the Islands

The rise of a worrisome new variant is front and center in headlines for good reason, but as is so often the case, finding the balance between irrational fear and legitimate concern is difficult. This hot topic will attempt to detail what the variant could mean for islanders and what we should be doing now to prepare.

Q: Haven't there been other variants, why the worry about this one?

A: First off, it is critical to understand that we are early on in a very fast-moving situation. Information presented here is not meant to be definitive, but instead is a best sense of things based on what we know (and what we don't know). Our understanding will change dramatically in the weeks to come.

Signs point to omicron spreading much more quickly than the delta variant. Omicron has been found in three Counties in WA to date (Pierce, King, and Thurston), a clear indicator that we will almost certainly see many more cases before long. Most experts would say it is likely that Omicron will be the dominant strain of the virus within the next couple of weeks to month.

Some research suggests that Omicron spreads twice as easily as Delta. If that is the case, we can expect a dramatic surge in case numbers, which will almost certainly lead to an unprecedented strain on healthcare infrastructure.

This potential for a sudden and unmanageable surge in cases is the reason we worry around Omicron.

Q: Does being vaccinated offer protection?

A: The expectation at this point is that being fully vaccinated against COVID will continue to offer significant protection against serious illness and death from all COVID variants, including Omicron. We may see some reduction in effectiveness but given the extremely high level of protection provided by the vaccines, vaccines remain a tremendously useful tool to protect ourselves from serious illness.

Some early research suggests that getting a third booster shot offers a significantly higher level of protection against Omicron than only two doses.

As with all previous COVID variants, the expectation is that Omicron will have far and away the most severe impact on those choosing to remain unvaccinated.

Q: OK, that sounds worrisome, but are things really that dire?

A: There is some early science that suggests the Omicron strain may end up being less severe than Delta, which would be good news and prevent this from being a worst-case scenario. However, a strain of COVID that is (for example) 15% less severe than Delta but which spreads twice as fast will still lead to a record surge in cases, and the inevitable hospitalizations and deaths (primarily in the unvaccinated) that follow. At the moment we are in a situation where we should be hoping for the best but preparing for a serious uptick in cases.

If that surge comes, we can expect that our healthcare systems will be stretched to their breaking points once again. Routine elective medical procedures will likely need to be postponed or cancelled, and those who need treatment for conditions not related to COVID may find access to care to be limited or impossible.

Q: So, what should we be doing to prepare?

A: Given that it will only be a couple of weeks at most until we know much more about Omicron, for now islanders should be thoughtful with their exposures. Clearly we have all relaxed our precautions considerably- but it would be wise to refresh our masking habits, and avoid situations where groups are indoors and unmasked in close proximity. If it turns out that the new variant is less worrisome than feared, we can quickly adjust once again. But, if Omicron does end up becoming a major concern, we'll be grateful that we were prudent and cautious early on in its spread.

Clearly there are a large number of holiday gatherings and events happening across the islands these days. Organizers and attendees should be thoughtful about their participation, especially if unvaccinated or notably high risk. And all islanders should recognize that we may need to rapidly adjust our plans and expectations based on how things with the Omicron variant unfold.

If you or your family are not yet vaccinated, now is the time to do it. The County is hosting free clinics this coming week and signing up and getting your shot is the single most important thing you can do to keep yourself and those you care about healthy. [SIGN UP HERE](#).

The County will also be giving boosters for those 18+ who are fully vaccinated at the same clinics. Again, [SIGN UP HERE](#).

In addition, the County Health Department is making a supply of more than 3,000 free PCR test kits available to the community to help support safe holiday travel and socializing. These are mail in tests that should be used by islanders if they are feeling symptomatic or have been exposed to a COVID positive individual. The supply is limited, but kits will be distributed free of charge beginning on December 13th. Details on how to pick up the kits will be released later this week.

Q: Will the rise of Omicron lead to changes in regulations or requirements?

A: What the future holds is entirely dependent on what we see happening with the spread and impacts of the disease, both here and elsewhere. If it becomes clear that Omicron is a threat to our healthcare system, we can expect more aggressive enforcement of masking requirements, and perhaps additional requirements around vaccinations.

At this point in the pandemic, it is abundantly clear that the vast majority of hospitalizations and fatalities are in unvaccinated individuals. In order to better protect both those who choose to remain unvaccinated and perhaps more importantly, to help minimize impacts to the greater healthcare system should Omicron spread rapidly, additional requirements may be needed. As always, the key is to remain patient and flexible and let decisions be dictated by science and experience, not by emotion or wishful thinking.

Q: What should I do if I or someone I know tests positive, especially if we start seeing large numbers of Omicron cases?

A: To start, know that the County Health Department Surveillance Team was stretched to their limit by the high number of cases in November. If case rates increase dramatically, the nature of contact tracing is going to be scaled back and far more responsibility will be placed on individuals. Any islanders who test positive for COVID will likely be asked to notify their own close contacts and to take their own steps to ensure that they

minimize the opportunity for disease spread. The Health Department will provide basic initial guidance but will not be able to support the high level of attention that has been provided to date.

Islanders will be asked to place greater trust in those that they interact with indoors and unmasked, and if cases spiral, you will be counting on those people you are interacting with to notify you directly if they test positive.

Q: That's a lot of info, can you give me the basics?

A: Yes. In short:

- While there is no need for panic, there is genuine cause for concern with Omicron.
- Fortunately, all of the usual precautions that we know work well (masking and vaccination) should continue to work well.
- This will be a fast-moving situation. Be cautious over the next couple of weeks until we know more.
- Stay patient. We'll get through this too.