

PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY: OMICRON VARIANT

December 23, 2021

The omicron variant of COVID-19 is moving rapidly across the United States and in Colorado. The CDC estimates the omicron variant is about 70% of COVID-19 cases nationwide. Several counties in Colorado including Eagle, Pitkin, Summit, and Denver are experiencing extreme increases in COVID-19 case numbers and hospitalizations due to the variant. The signature S gene drop of this variant has been found in wastewater samples from Pueblo County, in surveillance testing and sequencing done by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's lab.

Pueblo is currently trending downward in case numbers after a severe surge from the delta variant. If omicron were not present, Pueblo County would expect case numbers to continue to decline for several months. However, the omicron variant is expected to spread very quickly in the community over the next few weeks and hospital capacity will once again be threatened.

Here is what the Pueblo Department of Public Health and Environment (PDPHE) understands about the omicron variant at this time:

- There is evidence it will spread faster and cause higher levels of reinfection and vaccine-breakthrough compared to the delta variant.
- The data on severity in comparison to delta is mixed.
- Current monoclonal antibody treatment may be effective, appointments by calling 1-877-268-2926 or visiting comassvax.org.
- Greatest protection with third mRNA dose (Moderna or Pfizer).

Employers and schools should expect rapid spread of the virus and subsequent high levels of absenteeism due to illness among staff and students in the first quarter of 2022.

Employers, schools, and individuals are encouraged to take action to reduce the impact and spread of the virus.

PDPHE advises layered mitigation (e.g. multiple overlapping layers of protection) as an effective strategy for minimizing transmission and protecting yourself from the virus. To carry out layered mitigation, PDPHE advises the following:

- Get fully vaccinated. Three vaccines are currently available in the United States. All have demonstrated high levels of effectiveness and safety. For most people, side effects are limited and far less severe than illness caused by the virus itself.
- If you have been previously infected, consider getting vaccinated with two doses of either the Pfizer, Moderna or the Johnson and Johnson vaccines and get a booster when you are eligible. If you have medical concerns about getting the vaccine, please consult with your healthcare provider.
- If you are fully vaccinated, get the third booster dose when you are eligible. Boosters are available for those who are 16 and over and were fully vaccinated at least six months ago with Pfizer or Moderna vaccine and at least two months ago with the Johnson and Johnson vaccine.

Vaccines and boosters are free, and a doctor or healthcare provider referral is not required. If you have medical concerns about getting the vaccine, consult with your healthcare provider.

- Social distance. Maintain at least six feet between you and the other non-family members around you. Stay away from large crowds and gatherings.
- Wear a mask. Masks help reduce the transmission of viruses and help protect the person wearing the mask when worn appropriately (covering the nose and mouth).
- Practice good hand hygiene and sneezing/coughing etiquette. Cough and sneeze into your sleeve, wash your hands regularly, try not touch to your face.
- Monitor health symptoms daily. COVID-19 affects people differently. Common symptoms include fever, dry cough, tiredness, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, headache, and body aches. More serious symptoms include difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, chest pain or pressure, loss of speech or movement. For more information visit [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html)
- Stay home when you are sick or have symptoms. Transmission is commonly occurring in workplaces and in schools because people attend even though they are ill or symptomatic.
- Get tested. If you have been exposed to a known positive COVID-19 case or if you have symptoms, get tested immediately and self-quarantine until you receive the results. Testing is available for free at several locations in Pueblo County including the Pueblo Mall Site across from Hobby Lobby and near the state fairgrounds at the intersection at Mesa and Acero Avenues.
- Move public and private gatherings and events outdoors whenever possible to increase ventilation.
- People at high risk for COVID (those who are not fully vaccinated persons with conditions that increase their risk of severe COVID disease) should consider staying out of public indoor spaces until the case rate has declined significantly.
- Regularly clean surfaces and objects that are touched regularly.
- Maintain regular exercise, healthy diets and consistent sleep patterns to support a healthy immune system.

For more information regarding mitigation strategies visit:

- Quick Links to COVID-19 Community Mitigation Strategies and Tools: Resources for States, Tribes, and Localities www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/php/open-america/community-mitigation-quicklinks.pdf

FACE COVERINGS

PDPHE advises all people regardless of their COVID vaccination status to wear a mask when in crowded public indoor spaces, even in locations where the organization, government, or businesses does not require it. This practice is especially important when frequenting restaurants, bars, gyms, and other crowded places that do not require proof of vaccination for staff and patrons.

SCHOOLS, CHILDCARE, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

PDPHE further advises that all preschool through 12th grade schools, childcare facilities (regardless of licensure status), extracurricular activities, and higher education institutions require face coverings for all persons in indoor school, childcare, and activity settings, in alignment with CDC guidance. Schools, childcare facilities, extracurricular activities and higher education institutions should adopt testing strategies, improve ventilation of indoor spaces, conduct operations outdoors, when possible, emphasize hand-hygiene and physically space and cohort students and participants to the extent possible.

Resources:

- K-12 Schools Covid-19 Mitigation Toolkit cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-mitigation-toolkit.html
- Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 schools cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html
- Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html

CONGREGATE LIVING FACILITIES

PDPHE encourages all congregate living facilities including long-term care facilities, shelters, jails and situations where multiple families reside in a single home to require face coverings for all persons while they are indoors or in the facility.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Individuals using enclosed public transportation vehicles should maintain six-foot physical distancing to the extent possible. Public transportation providers should maximize ventilation on enclosed vehicles to reduce accumulation of the virus.

PDPHE reminds all transportation providers including schools and extracurricular activities, that the CDC has issued an order requiring individuals over the age of two to wear a face covering while riding in any public transportation or conveyance.

RESOURCES

For more information, resources, and links to supporting literature, please visit pueblohealth.org.

PDPHE will continue to evaluate the prevalence and risks of COVID-19 in Pueblo County and will adjust this Advisory and, if necessary, issue Public Health Orders accordingly.

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