

Banner Health | 1-24 Press Conference Transcript_1

Thank you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. Just a friendly reminder to our media partners, please include your name and media outlet affiliation with your question.

So our first question comes from Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix. When do you expect current surge to slow down? Some experts, including the World Health Organization, say Omicron might be the endgame of this pandemic. What's your take on this?

So as I state in my opening comments, we are still having increased numbers of COVID in our communities. And we do expect that we are close to the peak, probably occurring in early February. Certainly, I know that we are all tired of this pandemic. We've been at this here at Banner Health for two years of planning and taking care of our communities.

Omicron has really overwhelmed our communities. It's become the predominant strain. It became the predominant strain in a very, very short period of time. And we certainly hope that this will end the pandemic part of what we are experiencing and push us into the endemic part.

As we've stated previously, this virus is not leaving this Earth, and we will need to learn how to live with it. But hopefully, it will be at a lesser level of prevalence and perhaps become more of a subdued type of infection, perhaps becoming more [INAUDIBLE] in that we have it maybe in the winter season with other respiratory pathogens and we learn to live with it in that fashion.

We still don't know for sure if that's going to happen. So I'm going to remind all of us to do what you can right now to stay safe. Please, if you're not vaccinated, get a vaccine. If you're not yet boosted, get a booster. And very importantly right now, while we're having this high transmission in our communities, wear a really good well-fitted mask. A KN95 or an N95 will add that additional layer of protection for you until our case counts go down.

Katie Davis Young from KJZZ radio here in Phoenix asks several questions. So I will read the first two to you because they go together. So how many urgent care centers are currently closed? And do you know how long, they might be closed?

So as I've stated at our previous press conference and also today, our staff live in the communities with all of you. And while we are having high transmission rate, our staff-- despite being vaccinated-- are also exposed to that high virus circulating in the communities where they live.

Our urgent care closures are a direct result of our staff and the number of staff who are currently unable to come to work. We have, at any single day, a number of our urgent cares are closed. We can get you the actual number for today.

But as we have been working throughout that situation, we offer other options for you to still get care. So please, if you need to go to urgent care, check in online and schedule an appointment if you are able.

For those urgent cares that are close in your community that might be closed, we do have a tele option. And you can also schedule for that tele option on our Banner website. We do expect that as this peak-- as this wave of Omicron ultimately peaks and then subsides that we will be able to open up more of our urgent cares. But we are also committed to providing a lot of variety of options for you to receive care, and the tele option will remain a good one, even post this Omicron surge.

The other question that Katie Davis Young from KJZZ asks, on average, how many staffers have Banner facilities been short in recent weeks?

So thank you. Our staff have been just so committed to taking care of our communities throughout this entire pandemic. Our staff are over 91% vaccinated, which is helping them stay safe and healthy and able to come to work. However, the Omicron surge that we are all experiencing in our community-- even for those that are vaccinated and boosted-- is still having an impact.

Our staff-- we do have staff who are ill each and every day, who are calling off. But we've also been able to augment our staff through external contracted labor. We have individuals who work in other parts of our organization that are being redeployed to make sure that we have appropriate staff to take care of our hospitals.

At this time, our hospitals remain very busy. Our emergency departments are also busy, but we are open. At each individual facility, they are making day-by-day decisions about whether they can proceed with all of their elective surgeries-- again, these are medically necessary indicated surgeries-- and we have had very limited numbers of those that have had to be canceled.

So please, if you are having an emergency condition, please come into our emergency department to get care. If you are not having an emergency condition, please obtain care but do so through urgent care, a tele option, or your primary care physician.

Nicole Grigg from ABC15 here in Phoenix asks, are you seeing less number of COVID-19 patients needing critical care with Omicron? Or are they still in high need of critical care as we have seen with Delta?

So our ICUs remain busy, but we are starting to see that shift of decreased severity of this COVID wave compared to previous COVID surges. So our ICU numbers are less than they were during our peak of January of the prior year, and we believe that is a direct result of the decreased severity that we're experiencing with Omicron.

However, the total number of patients that we have that are either COVID positive or COVID suspected is at an extremely high level right now. But many of those patients are requiring a lesser level of care below the intensive care unit levels that we experienced with the Delta wave and prior waves before that one.

Stephanie Innes from the Arizona Republic asks, what is the situation with pediatric COVID 19 hospitalizations? Have they increased during this current Omicron fueled wave of patients?

Pediatric COVID volume in all of our markets has remained relatively low at this time.

Bennito Kelly from TucsonSentinel.com asks, how many cases in Arizona Banner hospitals are cases of the Omicron variant?

So we do not sequence the variants for patients that test positive for COVID in our hospitals. A number of those sequences are done through outside vendors. But as we have followed those statistics from those others who are doing the sequencing, the Omicron variant became the dominant variant here in the state of Arizona late December and has been the absolute predominant variant throughout the month of January. Very high 90% of all variants at this time are now related to Omicron, and there is almost nothing left of the Delta variant or other variants in the state at this time.