

## Banner Health | 12-28 Press Conference Transcript\_1

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Thank you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I'll read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. First question is from Howard Fischer from Capitol Media Services. The Arizona legislature convenes in a couple of weeks. Are there any changes in state law you would like them to enact that would make your job as a health care provider easier and/or help curb the spread of the virus?

Thank you. So I would just ask that that body, as well as all of you out in the community, continue to allow us to take the best care that we can of our community. This means allowing us to follow the science of what works to keep everybody as safe as possible. As I stated in my opening remarks, those include things like getting vaccinated, getting booster if you're eligible, staying home if you're ill, wearing a mask when you're indoors, and getting tested as soon as possible if you think you might have symptoms consistent with a COVID infection.

The next question is from Bud Foster with COLD. Test positivity jumped to 13% last week to 17% this week according to the state dashboard. What does this mean about the spread of omicron?

So data that we have been looking at for the sequencing of the Omicron variant does show, just like has been happening in other parts of the world, as well as other parts of the country, that this variant is highly transmissible and spreading quickly. The doubling time is very short. And by very soon in early January, this will absolutely be the predominant variant in the state of Arizona.

What does that mean? It means that we should all be doing the things that we were doing for the Delta variant and the variants that came before that. Get vaccinated if you're unvaccinated. Get boosted if you're eligible.

Wear a mask when you're indoors. Stay home when you're ill. And get tested if you think you have symptoms that could be consistent with COVID.

Brittini Thomason from 3TV and CBS 5 has two questions. I'll start with the first. Have you activated any triage tents at any of the facilities?

We have not activated triage tents at this time.

Her second question-- how many ICU beds do you have available in the Phoenix area hospitals?

We have very limited ICU bed availability. As I stated in my opening remarks, the patients in our ICUs at this time are very ill. The individuals who are in our ICUs with COVID are approximately 90% unvaccinated individuals.

It's incredibly important for us to maintain ICU capacity for patients that need it, both COVID and non-COVID. You can do your part to help us by getting vaccinated, boosted, wearing a mask when indoors, staying home with ill, and getting tested if you have symptoms that could be consistent with COVID.

Matt Galka with Fox 10 has two questions. I'm going to ask them both together, because they sort of go together. Do you agree with the CDC's decision to reduce quarantine time? It's seemingly based on the honor system and doesn't require a negative test, so how can people be sure they're safe to interact?

So as I stated in my opening comments, we were very aware of the CDC changes that were announced yesterday for the general public. But also as a reminder, CDC put out different guidelines for the health care industry last week. These guidelines are consistent with what we know, which is that individuals who test positive for COVID are most infectious a couple of days actually before they know they're sick and just the first few days after they begin having symptoms.

These guidelines of reducing the amount of time for isolation and quarantine are consistent with that understanding and will help all of us make sure that we can be safe, but also make sure that we can provide the activities that we need to as a health care industry for care of patients, as well as allowing individuals out there to begin to do their activities of daily life.

I would also like to point out, however, two things in regards to these shortened isolation and quarantine periods. It is a requirement that you mask after day five. In health care, all of our providers who are providing care to any patient are consistently and continuously masking in all health care settings. So we already are masking both for protection of the person providing care, as well as the patient who is going to be receiving care.

Eric Fink with KVOA asks, with many people now picking up home tests, how concerned are you right now the number of cases are underreported at county health departments?

So there's absolutely no doubt that the number of cases that we have in any state that you look at-- here in Arizona or other states where Banner operates-- are being underrepresented on county or state dashboards. This is because home tests are available to all of us. That said, we also know that home tests are in limited availability out there.

Again, the most important thing for all of us to do is to get vaccinated and to get boosted. If you think you have symptoms and you test yourself and you test positive, please make sure that you follow these CDC guidelines. And make sure that you are staying away from others for those first five days.

And make sure that you begin to mask if you do feel well enough to go out after those first five days. In addition to that for protection of everybody during this time of high transmissibility of the Omicron variant, we should be masking while we are in indoor settings.

Second question from Eric Fink from KVOA-- can you talk about your worries in the weeks to come?

So as I stated in my opening comments, our forecasting shows that this surge is definitely not done and that we can expect to have increased cases in our communities, as well as increase hospitalizations. Our forecasting models do not yet know exactly how to take into account the highly transmissible Omicron variant and whether or not that is going to have a significant increase in hospitalizations compared to prior Delta variant. That will still be an unknown for us as we go into the upcoming weeks.

It's very important for us to be here for all of those who need us in our communities that we serve. So we ask you to help us. Please, get vaccinated if you're not already vaccinated, get a booster shot if you're eligible, make sure that you stay home when you're ill, mask when you're indoors. And if you're having any symptoms, get tested.

Howard Fischer from Capitol Media Services asks, can you spell that new monoclonal antibody that you mentioned earlier?

Yes, I can. It's called sotrovimab and it is S-O-T-R-O-V-I-M-A-B.

That's great. Adi Guajardo with Newsy asks, has Banner Health experienced an increase in pediatric hospitalizations for COVID-19?

So we are aware of the reports in other parts of the country that are showing increased pediatric cases requiring higher levels of care. We do not yet have data to show that trend is being experienced by us here today.

I'll ask the second part of her question. But I think you've already answered it? Are you bracing for a surge in these cases like we are seeing in New York City?

Is that about the pediatric?

It is. Sorry, yeah.

OK, so all along throughout the entire pandemic, Banner Health has been constantly preparing for the surge. And that includes both being prepared for adult patients and pediatric patients. We certainly hope that we will not experience a large increase in pediatric patients, but we ask everybody to do your part.

For children that are age eligible, they should be getting vaccinated. For everybody else, get vaccinated to help protect the children. Get boosted if you're eligible, wear a mask when you're indoors, stay home if you're ill. And get tested if you're having symptoms.

Matt Galka from Fox 10 asks, what is the current ECMO machine availability or wait-list time?

So for ECMO availability, we have very limited ECMO availability within the system here at Banner Health. We do participate with a statewide network of individuals so that we can try and provide the most and highest level of care for those that meet criteria.

Those patients undergo a screening to make sure that they are eligible to meet the ECMO criteria. And then they are placed and prioritized on a wait list that is managed by experts who provide those ECMO procedures.

Stephanie Innes from the *Arizona Republic* has several questions. We'll just take them one at a time. Should Arizonans be testing themselves regularly for COVID-19 even when they don't have symptoms?

So testing for COVID should be done for anybody who's having symptoms. That's incredibly important. As a reminder, we do know that the Omicron variant can often present like a regular cold. So anything that could be consistent with COVID should cause somebody to go and get tested.

Make sure that if you test positive that you go ahead and stay away from other individuals. And if you're feeling well on day five per the CDC guidance, you can go ahead and begin to start your activities of daily life and wear a mask.

For other individuals, there's lots of other indications to get tested. We all are aware that sometimes if you're traveling that you need to get tested. And others who are planning to perhaps, visit with high-risk relatives are getting tested ahead of time to reduce or minimize the likelihood that they may pass on the virus to others. All of those are appropriate reasons to get tested.

Sounds like you touched on this. But just to clarify, she also asked, should people be testing themselves before getting together for New Year's gatherings even if they are vaccinated and have no symptoms?

So for New Year's of course, there are a lot of recommendations that are coming from the national guidelines of what you can do to make sure that you're safe. First of all, everybody should be vaccinated. And if you're eligible for a booster you should get your booster shot.

You should not be gathering in large groups. And you certainly should not be going to any type of gathering or party if you are feeling ill. For an extra layer of safety, individuals who are at high risk or are going to be congregating with other family members or friends who are at high risk, getting tested before you go to the gathering can add another layer of protection to try and make sure that nobody is unknowingly going to such a gathering and potentially bringing the virus to spread amongst others.