

REPORTER: Stephanie also asks, what is the name of the antiviral oral medication that will be available for preventive COVID-19 care and is it available right now?

SPOKESPERSON: So the oral antiviral medication that is just recently becoming available here for COVID is called PAXLOVID. It is going to be in very limited supplies. It will be in very limited availability here in the states that Banner Health operates.

In addition to that, because of its limited supply, it is only going to be prescribed to individuals of very high risk category. There are going to be age criteria for that, as well as individuals who have other comorbidities. There are a number of contraindications for this medication, so anybody who tests positive who may meet those criteria will need to have a conversation with their prescribing physician or other provider to make sure that the medication is right for them.

We would ask everybody to be patient as we begin to prescribe this medication through our physicians and other providers, and please realize that it is in limited supply and not everybody will be eligible to get it. And even those that are at high risk, some may have indications that put them out in exclusion because of maybe drugs that they are taking or other serious illnesses that put them at risk for having an adverse reaction to the medication.

We do know that the supply will increase in the upcoming weeks, and we also do expect that the other oral antiviral medication made by a different manufacturer will come to us in the upcoming weeks and be another tool available to us to help treat those that are testing positive for COVID.

REPORTER: Brittni Thomason from 3TV and CBS5 asks, as people test positive for COVID this week, is it more likely they have Delta or Omicron?

SPOKESPERSON: At this time, based on some data that we have, it is becoming more likely that those that are testing positive have Omicron versus Delta. We are right about at that tipping point based on data that we've been able to see.

That said, what you can do to protect yourself is the same whether it's Omicron or Delta. That includes things that we talk about all the time here with you. Get vaccinated if you're unvaccinated, get a booster shot if you're eligible, don't go out when you're ill, wear a mask when you're indoors.

REPORTER: Melanie MacEachern with the Hertel Report has several questions. We'll take them one at a time. In addition to the monoclonal antibodies, is Banner distributing the Pfizer antiviral pill PAXLOVID for COVID-19 patients?

SPOKESPERSON: At this time, Banner Health pharmacies are not distributing PAXLOVID. This medication is going to be in limited supply in the states where Banner operates and, again, will be prescribed by our physicians and other clinicians to those patients that meet criteria.

These criteria are going to be very limited to begin with and include things like age, comorbidities, and also an evaluation to make sure the patient does not take any other medications that may interfere with this new PAXLOVID medication and doesn't have any other exclusion criteria based on their medical history.

REPORTER: Another question from Melanie. Is there any decreased efficacy with the Omicron variant for PAXLOVID?

SPOKESPERSON: Actually, PAXLOVID has been shown to be highly efficacious at this time against all the variants of COVID that are out there and has a high likelihood of reducing the need for high risk individuals of having to be hospitalized.

REPORTER: I think you just answered this, but if there's anything else that you'd like to add, can you speak to the overall impact on patients when PAXLOVID is administered?

SPOKESPERSON: So the data has shown that when PAXLOVID is administered, that it will reduce hospitalizations in a way similar to what monoclonal antibodies have been doing. Again, this medication is just starting to become available in the states where Banner operates and will be in very limited supplies. Therefore, it will be prescribed to the highest risk patients until more supplies become available.

REPORTER: Matt Galka with Fox10 asks, you address what Banner is doing, but my question about the guidelines is more for the general public in regular work settings. Is it safe to interact with someone who tested positive five days ago?

SPOKESPERSON: So the CDC guidelines that came out yesterday have indicated that individuals who test positive for COVID who are feeling reasonably well on day five, meaning that they're not having high fevers, their symptoms are mostly resolving, can safely begin to do activities of daily life.

The caveat around that though, was that those individuals should continue to mask continuously when they're interfacing with other individuals for days six through day 10. So it is very important that on those days that those individuals, if they're feeling well and are starting to go out and about, that they mask up.

In addition to that, there are things that you can do to keep yourself safe. Get vaccinated, get boosted, don't go out when you're ill, get tested if you're having symptoms, and, of course, mask when you're indoors as well.

REPORTER: Howard Fischer from Capitol Media Services asks, to follow up on the question about legislature, does that mean that Banner opposes any measure that would block employers, hospital or otherwise, from requiring masks and/or getting vaccinated?

SPOKESPERSON: Thank you for that question. So as you are aware, Banner Health continues to require masking in all of our healthcare settings. We do continuously mask everywhere that we provide care and Banner Health does have a mandatory vaccination policy in place.

We strongly feel that these are things that are important for us as a healthcare provider to do so that we can make sure that we are safe and a safe place to provide care to patients.

REPORTER: Eric Fink from KVOA asks, did you ever imagine when this began that we'd still be here with full hospitals and ICUs almost two years later and one year since vaccines were available?

SPOKESPERSON: No, I did not. Banner Health has been planning for the pandemic since January two years ago, and continually working to respond to our communities to help everybody stay safe and provide as much care as we possibly can both to COVID and non-COVID patients. Our workforce is very tired.

As I stated in my opening comments, many of them had to forgo their celebrations and holidays so that they could be there to take care of our very sick patients. I would ask everybody out there to think about that two years in and do your part. Get vaccinated, get boosted, wear a mask when you're indoors, don't go out when you're ill, and if you're having symptoms, get tested.

REPORTER: Adi Guajardo from Newsy asks, earlier this month, you said if hospitalizations continued to climb, Banner Health would not be able to care for Arizonans. Does that remain the case?

SPOKESPERSON: It does. And so, as I stated in my opening comments here today, we remain very busy. We are continually to see a lot of patients coming in through our emergency departments. Our ICUs are very full at this time, so please do your part so that we can take care of you, your family, your loved ones, both COVID and non-COVID needs in our communities. Get vaccinated, get boosted, wear a mask when you're indoors, don't go out when you're ill, and get tested if you have symptoms.

REPORTER: I believe we touched on this earlier, but we'll ask here. Amelia Fabiano from ABC15 asks, would you recommend against gathering in large groups in public for New Year's even if people are vaccinated and/or boosted?

SPOKESPERSON: So it is the recommendation because of the high transmissibility of this Omicron variant that is starting to become the predominant variant here in the states where Banner operates that large gatherings should be avoided. We know this is very difficult and, as was asked in just a previous question, we have been in this pandemic for two years.

There are things that you can do to keep yourself as safe as possible. Be vaccinated, get boosted, wear a mask when you're indoors. Don't go out when you're ill, and if you're having symptoms, get tested.

REPORTER: Adi Guajardo from Newsy has a few questions here. The first one is, what is staffing looking like?

SPOKESPERSON: So staffing continues to be very tight. As I mentioned in my opening comments, we are stretched very thin. We have continued to bring in a lot of external contracted labor from outside the areas where Banner operates to augment our core staffing.

We ask all of you to help us. Do the things that you need to do, including getting vaccinated and boosted.

REPORTER: Another question from Adi. Any concerns about traveling nurse contracts expiring?

SPOKESPERSON: So we do have a number of our nursing contracts that have already expired, and are upcoming and expiring. We work very closely with those agencies. We look very closely at our staffing needs, and we continue to extend or renew those contracts to make sure that we have appropriate staff to take care of our communities.

REPORTER: And then Adi's last question. Are you prepared to handle a surge in cases?

SPOKESPERSON: At this time, we continue to plan for a surge in cases. However, as I stated in my opening comments, Banner Hospitals in the state of Arizona remain very busy. Some of our hospitals are already over 100% of our capacity. Our staffing remains very thin and our staff remains very tired.

We're two years into this pandemic, so we ask all of you to do what you can do to help us, which is to try and stay safe. Get vaccinated, get boosted, wear a mask when you're indoors, get tested if you're feeling ill, and do not go out if you're feeling ill and potentially infect others.