

And then the second part of her question is, "And what factors are causing that number to rise so quickly?"

So, like many others across the country, we know and are seeing in other states that the rise in pediatric patients is quite steep this time during the surge. Much of this is related to the fact that the Delta variant is highly contagious, so that is playing a role.

In addition to that, we know that it's so important for children to get back to school on site. And of course, when children are on site in school, if they are not masked, and if those that are age ineligible, such as those under the age of 12, are together, that that can increase the spread of this highly contagious variant. So our experience is starting to be very similar to what we've seen unfold in other states.

Again, our ask is to do our best and have all of you help participate to keep our kids safe. We can do that by doing three things. Number one, everybody who's age eligible, get vaccinated. Number two, children in school need to wear masks. And number three, when any of us, children or adults, feel ill, we should not be going into the school environment.

Nicole Garcia with FOX 10 asks, "Do you have any data about how many pediatric patients are under the age of 12, and how many 12 and over kids are hospitalized that are unvaccinated?"

I do not have those specifics. We'll have to follow up afterwards. Again, we do report all of our data to the Arizona Department of Health Services and other state dashboards, and we'll follow up with you after the press conference.

Liliana Salgado from Univision asks, "How do current pediatric stats compare to past surges?"

I'm going to follow up with you after the press conference. We'll get a few other additional statistics to try and put that into perspective for us.

Kelly Ragan with NoCo Optimist asks, "You mentioned we are seeing an exponential increase in cases. Knowing that in several counties, particularly in Colorado, vaccine rates are still less than 70%, should we expect a surge that will be on par with or worse than last winter?"

Great question. Not sure that I can exactly predict or forecast for that. Let me just go and look at a couple of other statistics that we do have for the northern Colorado marketplace. COVID admissions there are double what they were in mid-July, but actually have been steady for us for about the last 10 days. Those statistics are about 50% of the peak numbers from summer and winter surges that we experienced in 2020.

Again, we ask everybody out there to help us. It's great that we have had a little bit of a plateauing, if you will, in the last 10 days in that market. We can all do our part everywhere, and specifically in that market, by getting vaccinated as soon as possible.

Brittini Thomason at 3TV asks, "Why is there a need for COVID booster shots now?"

So I do not have all of the data yet that is going to be reviewed by the FDA and ACIP. So we will have additional data that will be released to all of us, and we can comment on that more in the future. The current understanding of what prompted that announcement, which, again, has just come out in the last day here, is that there appears to be some waning of protection of individuals who have received that vaccine. I expect that more of that information will become available to all of us, and we can provide some additional responses when that information has now-- when it becomes public.

Nicole Garcia at FOX 10 has two questions. I'll ask the first one. "You mentioned shifting patients to deal with staffing shortages. Can you explain what that entails?"

Yes, so Banner Health is a large health system, and specifically, of course, within the state of Arizona, we have many hospitals. This is something that we normally do. If we have, for instance, any type of issues where a hospital has more patients than is ideal, we have the ability to go ahead and transfer and shift patients to other facilities that have more bandwidth, beds, resources, and staffing available.

Again, this is something that we do on a regular basis, and we will continue to do that throughout this COVID-19 surge that we are experiencing. Again, Banner Health is open for both COVID and non-COVID patients. So anybody who's out there as a patient or a family member with somebody who's ill, we urge you to go ahead and seek the care that you need, and know that we will be available for you.

The second part of your question is, "Other than the Banner University cath lab, has any other Banner units had to divert patients?"

To my knowledge, we have not had to divert patients.

Griselda Zetino at KTAR asks, "Could you clarify what you mean by COVID enhanced precaution pediatric patients?"

Yes, so there are two types of COVID-19 patients that we track within our statistics. There are those patients who come to us who we expect might have COVID or have symptoms that could be consistent with COVID. When those patients come to us, we put them in enhanced precautions. This is both for their protection as well as the protection of staff who are taking care of them.

Once a patient is tested, they may then become COVID-positive, and they are now a COVID-positive patient who remains in enhanced precautions. Some patients who test negative may also remain in enhanced precautions if we are still suspicious that they might have COVID. Other patients who test negative for COVID can come out of enhanced precautions.

And the second part of her question is, "What percent of COVID patients at Banner right now are pediatric patients?"

I'm going to have to follow up with that. In a prior press conference, that number was a relatively small percentage of our total positivity. But let me make sure that we have that number for you today. We'll follow up.

Mitch Carr from 12 News-- and I think you just answered what he's getting at with pediatric enhanced precautions, but I'll ask the question just in case-- "Can you please clarify the term you are using regarding pediatric COVID admissions?"

Yes, so the number that I quoted was for pediatric admissions that were in enhanced precautions. Again, those are patients that come to us that have already either tested positive for COVID, or we are suspicious that their symptoms could be consistent with COVID, and they may still be waiting for a test to come back. It could include patients who have tested negative for COVID, but we are still suspicious that they could have COVID, and we keep them in enhanced precautions while we either retest them or look for another diagnosis, again, for everybody's protection.

And the second part of his question was, "Can you please explain what that means for patient treatment?"

So the patients who are getting treated, whether they're in enhanced precautions or not in enhanced precautions, still get the care that they need. The enhanced precautions are layers of additional safety that we put into place for protection. So it includes things like our staff needing to gown up, put an N95 mask on if there's going to be an aerosol-generating procedure, as well as wearing gear over their eyes and masks to protect them with a face shield. The care that the patient receives is still the care that's appropriate for them, but there are other protective layers that we put into place for protection of our staff.

Brittini Thomason at 3TV asks, "How would the logistics work for getting booster shots out?"

So we don't know the answer to that yet. Again, this is news that is just beginning to emerge out, and we will be looking for additional data that will become publicly available as the FDA and ACIP review that data.

And then, once that has been announced and there is a date, which I believe we're starting to hear about of perhaps being eight months after the completion of the two-dose series for those that received Pfizer and Moderna, Banner Health, as well as many other organizations and pharmacies, will, of course, be looking at what the demand will be for individuals who need to get that booster shot and make plans accordingly. And then we will communicate those to us.

This is just really new news for us this week, and we have not yet had an opportunity to understand it as deeply as we need to before we can respond to what our operational response may be.

Lindsey Walker with Independent Newsmedia asks, "I apologize if you've already answered this, but is Banner Health already offering third dose of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to immunocompromised people? If so, how many?"

So at this time, most of our patients are actually receiving their doses of COVID-19 vaccination through other partners that we have in the community, so local pharmacies as an example. So that is where most of our patients who need a third dose and are approved for a third dose, i.e., those that are immunocompromised, will go to get those.

OK, and it looks like this is our last question from Terry Tang at the Associated Press. "Has Banner had to open any additional COVID units or getting to the point where alternate spaces will have to become COVID units?"

So I believe that we answered that question the last press conference as well. So Banner Health does continue to make appropriate and open up additional COVID cohorted units within our space. We also have some spaces where we are doubling up on patients in double-patient rooms. And we will continue to morph our response pending just the number of people that we need to have-- that we need to take care of.

At this time, we are not above 100% bedded capacity. And we will continue to bring statistics that are relevant to you so that you can understand what's happening with us and our health systems at our press conferences.