

Banner Health | 9-1 Press Conference Transcript_2

Megan McNeil from KOLD-TV in Tucson asks, is Banner concerned a twindemic may happen with flu and COVID this year?

Certainly we are very concerned about the winter season, as we have a surge upon us of the pandemic of what's happening with COVID-19 in our communities right now. And we are also approaching our normal winter respiratory pathogen season, which includes influenza, as well as other circulating diseases out there. Right now, as we've reported previously, our pediatric population is also experiencing a high level of COVID, higher than what we've seen previously, as well as high levels of RSV, which is kind of early in the season. So we do have concern about what's happening and the winter season. We ask all of you to do your part. What can you all do right now? Get yourself vaccinated if you're not yet vaccinated with COVID, and also stay tuned with us as we enter into influenza season and provide you additional information about influenza vaccination.

Next question comes from Karen [? Model-Kean ?] from Cronkite News here in Phoenix. Karen asks a two part question, so I will ask you the first question, Dr. Bessel. Why is it important for Banner employees to show proof of vaccination?

So I believe I answered that previously, but I will just restate a little bit of that. It is important for us, as a health care system, to make sure that our workplaces safe for our team members as well as patients who come to us for care. Banner Health has made COVID vaccination mandatory, and we have a November 1 deadline. It's important for us to receive confirmation of that vaccination so that we can make sure that we are abiding by this policy that we've put into place, and that all of us as employees of Banner, myself included, meet the November 1 deadline.

And then the second part to that question, what is happening to those employees that don't want to get vaccinated?

So we are not yet at our November 1 deadline, and we are actively working with employees who are either not yet vaccinated or who have not yet provided proof of their vaccination status. Again, I want to go back to my previous statements. It is our intent to provide the safest environment for our team members to work as well as the safest environment for patients to come and receive care. It is with that intent that we've put this policy into place, and we're actively working with all of our team members who are not yet compliant with that as we work towards that November 1 deadline.

Steve [? Klassen ?] from Arizona News Radio Network asks, what do you tell people who have been vaccinated but don't think they need to be tested again?

Yeah, well, the Delta Variant that is now the predominant variant in the United States has obviously changed things for all of us. And I want to go back to just some of the things that we've talked about here previously, related to COVID vaccination. COVID vaccination is working well to reduce the most serious complications of getting COVID. So that includes death, hospitalization, and ICU care. However, it is still possible for any of us who are vaccinated, myself included, to potentially get a breakthrough infection. That does not mean the vaccine isn't safe. It doesn't mean that the vaccine is not effective. Breakthrough infections can happen even in those who are fully vaccinated. The problem with breakthrough infections, even if you have only mild disease, is you could spread COVID to somebody else. So if you have symptoms that could be consistent with COVID, it is important to get tested to find out whether you have breakthrough infection. In which case, you need to take precautions and isolate so that you do not spread COVID to others.

Nicole Garcia from Fox 10 here in Phoenix asks a two part question, so I will ask you the first question, Dr. Bessel. How many pediatric patients have not been vaccinated?

I do not believe that I have that detailed level of statistics with me here today. We can go ahead and follow up. I am going to go back to our roll up statistics where, at the Banner Health roll up level for all patients that are with us in our hospitals who have COVID, 90% of those individuals are unvaccinated. We we'll go ahead and get the pediatric population statistic for you as a follow up, remembering that some of those individuals in our pediatric population are, of course, age ineligible. Those under the age of 12 are unable to get vaccinated. We'll get some follow up for you after the press conference here this morning.

And then the second part of that question from Nicole Garcia at Fox 10 News here in Phoenix, what is the average age of a COVID positive pediatric patient?

I do not have that. We can do some follow up after the press conference.

Nicole Garcia from Fox 10 asked a separate question. Are you calling on Maricopa County leaders to implement a mask mandate at K-12 schools after their data shows districts without mask mandates are more likely to experience COVID outbreaks on campus.

We are working very closely with the Maricopa County Department of Health Services and meet with them on a regular basis as we both work collaboratively to make sure our communities are as safe and as healthy as possible during the pandemic. As I've stated here previously, we have three recommendations for how to keep our kids safe in school. Number one, children should mask while in school. Number two, everybody who can get vaccinated, who is age eligible, of course, should get vaccinated. That helps protect the children who are in school. And lastly, nobody should go to school, either as a child or as an adult who's working in a school, who has symptoms who might be ill with COVID. I am aware of the data that was shared from Maricopa County Department of Health Services that clearly shows that schools that have masking in place are not having as much of a problem with COVID outbreaks compared to schools that do not have masking in place.

Shelle Jackson from KVOA TV 4 in Tucson asks a two-part question, so I will read the first one for you, Dr. Bessel. What is the status of ICU beds and ventilators in Arizona?

So I'm going to refer you to the Arizona Department of Health Services dashboard where you can get that information and remind you that, at this time, Banner Health is taking care of almost half-- actually, about 44% today-- of patients who have either COVID or potential COVID suspected, and so the trends that you see on the Arizona Department of Health Services dashboard related to those two items tracks very closely with Banner Health, given our large percentage that we're taking care of here in the state.

The second part to that question, are most of our patients from the state, or from other states which are struggling?

I'm sorry, could you restate that?

Sure. Are most of the patients from the state of Arizona, or from other states which are struggling? I think she's asking if we are also treating patients from other states outside of Arizona.

Most of our patients currently that are in Banner Health Arizona hospitals are residents of the state of Arizona.

Stephanie Innes from the Arizona Republic asks two questions, so I will ask you the first. One do you see any signs that the surge has plateaued?

We see some signs that our numbers are not exponentially increasing over the last week or so. Our ICU numbers, however, are increasing. Again, we'll refer you to the Arizona Department of Health Services dashboard. Banner Health is caring for almost half of COVID or COVID suspected patients, and the trends that you see on the Arizona Department of Health Services dashboard very closely, of course, matches Banner Health's data.

And then the second question that Stephanie Innes from the Arizona Republic asks, what do you foresee in terms of COVID hospitalizations in Arizona in the coming weeks?

We use a number of different ways to take a look at that. We use different forecasting models, and we work closely with others who are also doing that same work. Currently, it is forecasted that we will continue to see increases in patients who require hospitalization and ICU care, which is why we're here in front of you here this morning to ask you to do your part and help yourself. Get a COVID vaccination so that you don't become ill. And get a COVID vaccination so you don't need to come to our hospital for care for COVID.

Emily Carman from Arizona PBS asks two questions. I'm going to read you the first. Do you have any numbers regarding the capacity of ICUs at Banner? Are they very full?

At this time, we remain very busy, and our ICUs are very busy as well. I will refer you to the Arizona Department of Health Services dashboard. Banner Health is caring for almost half of the COVID or COVID suspected patients in the state. And so the trends that you see on the Arizona Department of Health Services dashboard very closely match the trends that we're seeing here at Banner because of a large percentage of the patients that we do care for here.

The second part to that question from Emily Carman with Arizona PBS, are the majority of people in the ICU COVID patients?

At this time, the majority of patients that are in the ICU who are on ventilators are actually COVID patients. A little bit over 50%.

Kamila Kudelski from Wyoming Public Radio asks, what are the plans that are to be deployed if there are staff shortages due to employees quitting from vaccine mandate?

So I'll repeat a few of the comments that I said already in the press conference related to this question. So, first of all, our deadline for mandatory COVID vaccination for all of our team members is November 1. And as we work our way towards that, we are working with all of our employees. Our intent is to create a very safe place, both to work in, as well as for patients to come and receive care. Our intent is to not have employees leave us over this requirement for employment here at Banner Health. We continue to hold town halls to make sure that we have a forum and a communication cascade to make sure everybody understands the intent, the safety of the vaccines available to us, and the efficacy of the vaccines that are available to us. As with all things, including the surge that is upon us, we do create plans for how we will respond to make sure that we're here to take care of patients who are in our communities. That includes increasing cases of COVID as well as any staffing shortages that we might have as we continue to work our way through the pandemic. For all of you out there who are unvaccinated, we ask you to please protect yourself and get vaccinated. We hope that you do so that you don't get COVID, and you don't need to come to get care for us with your COVID illness.

Liliana Salgado from Univision here in Phoenix asks-- and this is a two-parter, so I'll ask you the first question. Major events in Arizona have been canceled. Would you recommend the same for upcoming concerts and other events?

That's a great question. I'm going to say just a couple of comments related to that. So here at Banner Health, we continue to look to the CDC as well as we work with our local department of Health Services to try and inform and respond to the emerging dynamics of what is happening here with the COVID surge that is upon us. At this time, we do continue to follow the CDC guidelines, which include masking for anybody, both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals who are indoors, making sure that you get vaccinated, and not going out when you feel any symptoms that might indicate that you have COVID. We will continue to communicate and follow those guidelines for ourselves here at Banner Health and applaud all of those who are responding appropriately while thinking of the health and the well-being of the communities that are out there. We expect that this COVID surge is going to continue. We do have opportunity to bend the curve by getting more of you out there vaccinated, and we will expect that we will have to manage through the rest of the surge and might need to make decisions about what types of events are appropriate and not appropriate. We will continue to do that by abiding by the guidance from CDC and working with our local department of Health Services.

And then the second part to that question, should bars and other places consider shutdown again, regardless of vaccination status?

So again, I'm going to look to the CDC and our local Department of Health Services, and we will continue to abide by that guidance, as well as recommend following that guidance. So, at this time, it is recommended that if you're age eligible, you should get vaccinated. That will decrease the risk of you getting infected and needing care from any of us in the emergency department, in the hospital, or the ICU. In addition to that, CDC guidance is that all of us should be, when we are indoors, be wearing a mask. And I would recommend that all of you, as you think about your upcoming Labor Day plans, do so if you're going to be indoors.

Steve [? Klassen ?] from Arizona News Radio Network asks, what is the recommendation for when you should get a booster shot. Six months? Eight months after initial vaccinations?

So, at this point, we just don't know. We will continue to look to the FDA, the CDC, and the ACIP in regards to any upcoming recommendations that they might have around boosters. Certainly, we know that there's been a lot of different reports out there about what might be coming. But, at this time, there is no official recommendation for boosters other than for those patients who are immunocompromised who should get a third booster at this time if they are in that category. If you needed additional information about that, I would refer you to the CDC site. That has a lot of information about the immunocompromised and who should get a booster.