

Spencer Blake with KPHO Channel 5 here in Phoenix asks two questions. And I will read the first one to you, Dr. Bessel. We've heard of some hospitals dealing with large numbers of West Nile patients. How many West Nile patients has Banner been seeing?

Yes, we are aware that there are some parts of the state of Arizona right now that are having increased numbers of West Nile virus. We continue to work closely with our local department of health to report those cases. At this time, due to patient privacy concerns, I cannot share the exact number of West Nile patients that are in Banner Health. But we continue to watch that trend and will continue to work with our department of health for any other activity that might be necessary for all of us to make sure that we stay safe.

As we all know, this particular disease is transmitted by mosquito bites and so would ask anybody out there if you're concerned about that, make sure that you are wearing repellent to reduce the number of mosquito bites that you might get and also to reduce the amount of standing water that you might have in your backyard that is a breeding ground for mosquitoes who then can potentially carry West Nile virus and infect you through a mosquito bite.

And the second question from Spencer Blake at CBS 5 here in Phoenix, is the number of West Nile patients that Banner is seeing, is that enough to put elective procedures on hold?

No, it is not. Here at Banner Health, we continue to manage-- and sometimes this is literally on an hour-by-hour basis-- the volume of patients that we are experiencing. At this time, West Nile is not the biggest component that is creating the stress on our health care system. The biggest component creating stress on our health care system that has an opportunity to be mitigated is COVID patients.

As I shared in my graphic earlier today in today's press conference, the vast majority, approximately 90% of all patients that are in our hospital or in our ICU or in our ICU on a ventilator, are unvaccinated individuals. Those are the patients that not only are suffering from a terrible disease of COVID requiring hospitalization, ICU care, or ventilatory care. They are also patients that are adding stress onto the health care systems.

If you're not yet vaccinated against COVID-19, please get vaccinated. That will help reduce the volumes of patients that we have in our hospitals to make ourselves more available to everybody who might need our care.

Melanie MacEachern from The Hertel Report asks, even with the decline in COVID-19-related hospitalizations, are there concerns regarding supplies for the treatment of COVID-19? For example, due to limited supply, the state of Tennessee has issued guidance to only provide monoclonal antibody treatment to unvaccinated COVID-19 patients. Is there any similar concern in Arizona or for Banner in general?

So in general, our supply chain remains adequate. Specifically to the question about monoclonal antibody, we do not have a shortage being experienced today. However, just as was referenced in some changes that were made in another state outside of Arizona, there has been a change in how monoclonal antibodies are being distributed across the entire country.

That change has been relatively recent and therefore new. And so we will continue to monitor that. And if there are changes in response to that or shortages of monoclonal antibody, we will, of course, communicate that. For anybody out there who has tested positive for COVID-19 who might be a candidate for monoclonal antibody, I recommend that you go to our [bannerhealth.com](https://www.bannerhealth.com) website for additional information and assistance in getting scheduled.

Lindsay Walker from the Independent Newsmedia here in Phoenix asks, is Banner hopeful that 5 to 11-year-olds might be able to gain access to the vaccine soon?

Banner Health is always hopeful for anything that can help us during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also rely upon other agencies at the federal level to make sure that they are looking at appropriate data to guide those decisions. If and when approval is given for individuals in that age group to be safely and effectively vaccinated against COVID-19, we will bring that information forward and would be supportive of that when it is officially approved.

And Lindsey Walker from Independent Newsmedia did ask a second question in reference to that first one. Will that expansion of vaccine eligibility alter the forecast at all?

It might. There are several things on the horizon that may have a good positive effect on our forecasting. The first is any increase in uptick in COVID-19 vaccination hence my comments throughout every press conference for those that are unvaccinated to please go ahead and get your vaccine.

In addition to that, expanded age groups as an example and/or booster shots as another example can potentially increase the number of individuals that are out there living in our communities to have added protection that will both reduce the likelihood of them becoming ill as well as the potential likelihood of them becoming infected and potentially passing on virus to others. So we will continue to update you as those expansions may get announced. And again, as I stated previously to another question, we are expecting some additional information to come out this week in regards to boosters.

Mitchell Zimmerman from 12 News here in Phoenix asks, how many transfers between hospitals in-- or how have transfers between hospitals in Arizona been going lately? Have you received any transfers from Northern Arizona recently like Flagstaff Medical Center?

So we have an entire transfer center here at Banner Health that assists with all transfers. I do not have discrete data with me today as to which entities you mentioned. I think Northern Arizona might have been transferring to Banner Health. We can get some additional follow-up global information about how many transfers Banner Health is receiving to give you a follow-up on this question.

Brian Brennan from KGUN 9, the ABC affiliate in Tucson, asks, why are you forecasting a more significant flu season than any other year?

So we expect a severe flu season upcoming for a number of different reasons. First of all, last year was literally almost a non-existent flu season. It is unusual to have a low-level flu season followed by another very low-level flu season. So that is one component that we expect is going to feed into severe flu season and likely increased illness and hospitalizations from that.

In addition to that, when we reflect back of what was happening during last flu season, there was a lot of other mitigation efforts that were underway to protect all of us from COVID-19 spread. We were not congregating. There were not a large of-- large gatherings occurring. We were often perhaps working from home. We were also masking when out in public and in indoor spaces.

I do not expect that all of that mitigation is going to occur during the upcoming winter or occur at the same level that it was last winter. Influenza spreads in a very similar way to COVID through respiratory pathogens. And so they spread when we are together in large groups in tight settings. And so all of those factors feed into the forecast of expecting a very severe flu season this upcoming season.

Steve Clawson with Arizona News Radio Network asks, with today being the first day of fall, snowbirds will soon start returning to Arizona. How concerned are you about people from other states migrating to Arizona for the winter season?

So in our forecast model, we do make some assumptions about that. And as we know, in almost every winter, we have an influx here into the Phoenix metropolitan area and some other areas within the state of Arizona of winter travelers that come from other areas. So that is already built into our forecast model.

Certainly, we know that when individuals travel, that can increase some risk of getting COVID-19, especially if you are unvaccinated. And we also know that when individuals travel perhaps from another area that might be having higher COVID activity into a place like Arizona if we are having less COVID activity at that time that that can introduce more Delta COVID variant virus to spread into our own communities.

That said, we have already taken that into account into our forecasting model and would ask everybody who's traveling to please make sure that you're following appropriate guidelines to keep yourself safe. If you're traveling, and you're unvaccinated, please get vaccinated before you travel. There are multiple COVID-19 vaccine appointments open today.

In addition to that, when traveling, please follow federal guidelines and mask up. And if you're traveling with others in a car perhaps that are not part of your usual group, make sure everybody is vaccinated. And also, mask up when you're in tight settings where the air circulation can be more conducive to spreading virus.