

Dr. Marjorie Bessel, Banner Health chief clinical officer, Aug. 3 press conference remarks

In July Arizona saw an exponential increase in COVID cases and positivity rate. This increase correlates with what we have seen in our Banner hospitals this past month.

Since July 1, COVID hospitalizations have increased by 95% and ventilator usage has increased by 300%. Hospitalizations, ICU admissions and ventilator usage are in the 20- to 60-year age group, which is different from prior surges when most patients were over 60 years of age. Pediatric patients currently account for 5% of all COVID hospital admissions.

Non-COVID hospital admissions are also 15% higher than a typical summer, representing patients who delayed care last year during previous surges and are now seeking care.

Due to the increased COVID positivity and lower than optimal vaccination rates in Arizona, we have adjusted our visitor restrictions this week. As of yesterday, August 2, visitation at our facilities in Maricopa, Gila and Pinal counties was reduced to one visitor per patient per day. Coconino and Pima counties will remain at two visitors per patient per day for now because those markets have slightly lower prevalence and higher vaccination rates, but as COVID cases continue to increase across the state we may also need to implement tighter visitor restrictions in those counties as well. We evaluate this policy on a weekly basis and make changes, as necessary. For up-to-date information on our visitation policy you can visit bannerhealth.com.

The Delta variant is fueling the spread of this virus in the United States. It is highly transmissible and has even caused breakthrough infections amongst the vaccinated. Now this does not mean that the vaccine is not working. The COVID vaccines are still highly effective in preventing serious illness and death. This is demonstrated by the low rate of hospitalizations and deaths of vaccinated individuals across the country. Roughly 97% of COVID hospitalizations and 99% of deaths are individuals who are unvaccinated.

As the CDC confirmed last week, the viral load for those who contract the Delta variant is much higher than other strains, making it more likely for infected individuals to spread the virus to others. That is why the CDC came out with its recommendation to resume masking in indoor settings regardless of your vaccination status. By doing this you are protecting yourself from infection as well as those around you from contracting the virus. This recommendation applies to everyone 2 years of age and up.

As always, I close out my opening remarks with an ask for all of you. Please get vaccinated as soon as possible. The vaccines that have been approved by the FDA through emergency use authorization are safe and effective. They will greatly reduce your chances of getting seriously ill and dying. In addition, please pull your masks out of retirement for the time being. I know that we were all thrilled to hear a few months ago that they were no longer necessary, but as you have witnessed throughout the pandemic, COVID is a resilient virus, and newer mutations of the virus pose a serious threat due to low vaccination rates across the country.

Thank you.