

# Weekly Update with Dr. Bissell

## October 18, 2021



### Press Statement from Dr. Bissell

Good afternoon. The number of new COVID cases in our district, as well as across the state and the nation, continues to decline, though we are still at high community transition as defined by the CDC. According to the regulations from the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry, this means that all employees throughout our region are required to wear masks indoors, whether or not they are vaccinated.

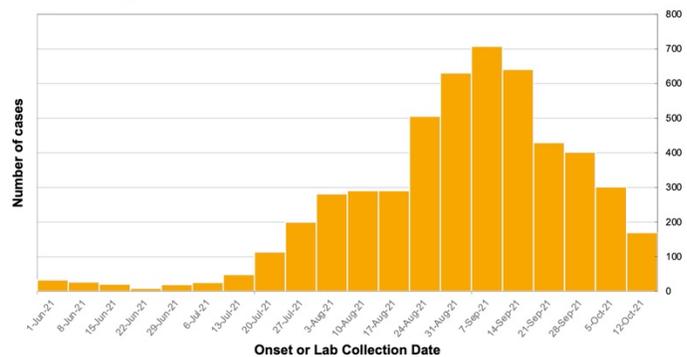
Our epi curves continue to show a decline in cases. Please remember the last column isn't complete and will fill in over the course of the week.

You can see from our school-aged children graph that cases in this group are also going down. This makes sense because transmission in the schools has been minimal; 70+% of all transmission has been in the household, so as the adults don't get the COVID, they don't share it with the younger children. The schools are doing very well.

Hospitalizations lag behind new cases by a number of weeks. This morning, hospitals in the New River Health District reported 37 patients with COVID and 1 person under investigation. This is fewer cases than last week, so the downward trend is starting to be seen in hospitalizations as well. Our hospitals are still very busy, but they remain at normal operations.

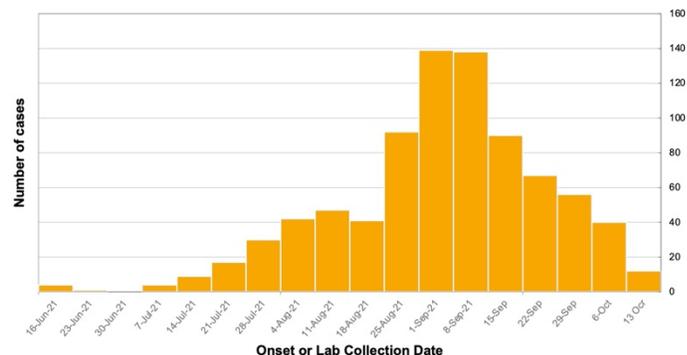
The Delta variant is so highly transmissible that it's increasingly likely this was the last large surge. It has hit our unvaccinated population with very high case numbers. Epidemiological analysis and serology studies show that for each reported case there are likely 3-4 additional ones. Community immunity and vaccinations together have greatly increased the number of people who have antibodies to COVID. We do not expect that COVID will go away, but that we will likely see smaller waves that ebb and flow, not unlike flu and other respiratory illnesses.

**NRHD, COVID-19 Epi Curve, 1 Jun - 18 Oct, by Week of Onset or Lab Collection Date**



Be committed. Be well.

**NRHD School - Aged Children (5-17 years old), 1 Jun - 18 Oct**



Be committed. Be well.

Last week the FDA Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee recommended booster shots for the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines. This week, the FDA is expected to fully authorize them and the CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) will meet to discuss their recommendations. We do expect the booster shots to be authorized in the next week or so, and those who got Moderna will be eligible for a half-dose booster at least 6 months after their second shot. People who got a Johnson & Johnson shot will be eligible 2 months after their shot.

The FDA Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee (VRBPAC) has also scheduled a meeting to discuss authorization of the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 5-11 on October 26th. Then the CDC's Advisory Committee for Immunization Practices will meet to discuss its recommendations. Once these are authorized, we and our pharmacy/pediatrician partners are prepared to offer vaccines to the younger school children. The FDA may address mixing vaccines at this meeting as well.

With the new cases going down, we are seeing less demand for testing. This should help resolve the difficulty in finding rapid tests. Testing is still available daily (M-F) at health departments throughout the district with just over a 24 hour turnaround.

As this surge resolves, and people engage more in travel and companies move back to the office, many questions are arising, such as who is considered fully vaccinated, how to prove one is vaccinated, and when to test. At this time there are no plans to change the definition of who is fully vaccinated. Fully vaccinated is 2 weeks after the second dose of an mRNA vaccine or 2 weeks after one dose of Johnson & Johnson. Boosters are available for those at higher risk as authorized by the FDA and CDC. Other people considered vaccinated are those who received active doses in clinical trials of vaccines that are not yet approved by the FDA, but are listed for emergency use by the World Health Organization (such as AstraZeneca/Oxford and Novavax) or have been independently confirmed by a data and safety monitoring board. Now that some international borders are reopening, organizations will be seeing people with other vaccines or some mix and match. People are considered fully vaccinated if they received any two of an FDA approved or WHO approved combination as long as there was at least 17 days between doses.

As more people look for electronic proof of vaccination, VDH has instituted a QR code access to COVID vaccination records. For this to work there must be a phone number connected to the record, which may require calling the state Monday-Friday, 8am-6pm, at 877-829-4682 (877-VAX-IN-VA). Initial record entries did not require phone numbers, so during the peak of our vaccination efforts when tens of thousands of vaccines were being administered daily, phone numbers may not have been entered.

Employers are required by Virginia's Department of Labor and Industry to have a COVID response plan, which includes knowing which employees are vaccinated and which have had COVID, in addition to requiring all employees to mask indoors during times of high or substantial community transmission. Some employers are requiring testing as part of their back-to-work policies after having COVID. Individuals should check with their employers about business specific requirements.

During periods of high transmission, the best practices are testing prior to engaging in indoor activities in close quarters, such as weddings, worship, and indoor events like concerts, then testing again 5-7 days later. Anyone with any symptoms of respiratory illness should get a COVID test.

In other news, in a national 2021 National Health Security Preparedness Index, compiled by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the University of Colorado School of Public Health, and the University of Kentucky Center for Business and Economic Research, Virginia tied for first place for state readiness to respond to public health threats during the pandemic. We tied with Maryland, Massachusetts and Nebraska. In Virginia, public health is funded by the state with a match from the localities. Once again, I'd like to thank the communities in the New River Valley for their unique level of cooperation in funding and working with our public health team.

Families are starting to plan for the holidays. This year, please plan for safe gatherings. We don't want to cause another uptick in cases. Halloween parties outdoors are ideal, but be careful of carpooling. For the winter holidays, please plan to be careful, stay outdoors as much as possible and remember to wash your hands. If you are visiting vulnerable family and friends, be extra careful. Our behavior should be informed by a risk assessment of the activities we are considering.

Lastly, please make sure to get a flu shot. We are already seeing flu. People getting COVID boosters can get their flu vaccine at the same time.

I'll take your questions now.

*—Dr. Noelle Bissell, Director, New River Public Health District.*

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