

Community Weeklies  
3.29.21  
Spring Reminders  
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The return of glorious weather in Southwestern Virginia coincides with reasons to feel hopeful about the future. Case counts are down since their peak in January and we have made considerable progress in getting our community vaccinated.

Still, we need to remain vigilant in our battle against COVID-19. While the rates of infection have slowed, we still have widespread community transmission. In fact, last week we actually had an increase in the number of new cases of COVID-19 compared to the week before and we had 40 people hospitalized with COVID-19. Furthermore, we know that more variants of the virus are being identified in Virginia, as they are across the country.

Many people have been asking questions about the variants. Questions include: what are variants and why are they important? While they may have complicated sounding scientific names, the variants that you are hearing about simply refer to mutations, or changes, in the COVID-19 virus. Like many other viruses, when the virus that causes COVID-19 is replicating (making copies of itself), mutations can occur. Such changes might affect how the virus spreads (transmissibility), how sick you could get (disease severity), and how well tests, medical treatments, and vaccines might work on different variants.

The best way to decrease the risk of variants is to decrease disease activity. This is one of the reasons why it is so important for all of us to get vaccinated when it is our turn and to continue to keep our distance, wear our masks, and wash our hands. Through our case investigations and contact tracing, we know that most of our recent cases are associated with social gatherings and household transmission. As families consider their Easter and Passover gatherings or their plans for spring break, it is essential that we all work together to continue to observe public health recommendations. It is simply too soon to resume large social gatherings, especially those that are indoors and those that involve eating or drinking together which require the removal of masks.

Even though we are not yet where we need to be with respect to COVID-19 disease activity, we do have many reasons to be hopeful. Every day, more people are fully vaccinated and those who are can safely gather in small groups as long as everyone in the group is at least two weeks past their second dose of Moderna or Pfizer vaccine or two weeks past their dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

For time being, we all need to continue to wear a mask in public, observe physical distancing, and wash our hands. And most importantly, get the COVID-19 vaccine when it's our turn. There is no one single step or policy that can stop the spread of COVID-19 but if we all follow these recommendations, we will finally be able beat this pandemic.