

Community Column

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Delta Variant and Case Increases

By Cynthia Morrow, MD, MPH

I look forward to the day when the message of these community updates will not be COVID-centered, but unfortunately today is not that day. We have seen an uptick in COVID-19 cases in the Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts (RCAHD) in the first half of July with a concerning increase in the number of cases just in the past few days.

Thanks to COVID-19 vaccines, we saw a consistent decrease in the number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths since RCAHD's peak disease activity in January through the beginning of May. Since early May, we reached a fairly steady average of 75 new cases of COVID-19 per week, however in just three days this past week, almost 90 cases of COVID-19 were reported in RCAHD. These numbers prove that this nasty virus is present and spreading especially among our unvaccinated residents.

The Commonwealth of Virginia and the nation are seeing similar trends of increasing cases. What primary drivers are likely behind these trends? Across the country, the Delta variant accounts for a growing proportion of new coronavirus cases. By July 3, approximately 60% of new cases nationally were associated with the Delta variant. This much more contagious strain of the virus is also the expected culprit in the increase of local cases. Holiday weekend gatherings also likely contributed to the increase.

Some additional questions I have recently received about the Delta variant include:

**Are the COVID-19 vaccines effective against the delta variant?**

A: Yes, the COVID-19 vaccines are extremely effective in protecting fully vaccinated people from getting severe disease (including hospitalizations and deaths) from the virus, including infections from the Delta variant. Vaccination remains the most important tool to protect individuals from COVID-19.

**I'm fully vaccinated. Should I continue to wear a mask?**

A: It is possible for fully vaccinated people to catch COVID, but overwhelmingly the cases are occurring in unvaccinated individuals. If a vaccinated person does have breakthrough disease, they are extremely unlikely to become seriously ill from the virus. It is important to know that some people who have weakened immune systems may have a suboptimal response to the vaccine, making them more likely to have breakthrough disease. People who have weakened immune systems, people who are taking care of the ill or elderly loved ones, or people who simply want to be more cautious may choose to continue to wear masks, especially in indoor settings.

The reality is that chances are good that local hotspots of COVID-19 disease activity will continue to emerge, especially in areas with dangerously low vaccination rates. If you live in a jurisdiction or small cluster of zip codes with a rate of only 40-50 percent or less of fully vaccinated adults, you are at a greater risk of illness. Consider masking and maintaining social distance, and of course, consider getting vaccinated as soon as possible. You can see the data for your zip code at: <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/covid-19-case-and-testing-data-by-zip-code/>

COVID-19 has essentially become a preventable disease. We at the health department will continue working to prevent any unnecessary deaths or hospitalizations by encouraging everyone who has not yet been vaccinated to do so as soon as possible. Don't hesitate to call us at 540.613.6597 or your healthcare provider if you have any remaining questions about the vaccine. And *please* do not become yet another COVID-19 statistic.