

Community Column

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The Question of Boosters

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Fueled by the highly transmissible Delta variant, the Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts are currently in the midst of a surge of cases of COVID-19. In June, we saw a low for the year of about 80 new cases each week, but by early July, that number had jumped to over 200 new cases per week. We're now in the eleventh week of this most recent surge, with over 950 new local cases were reported this past week alone.

This dramatic increase in cases in just two months understandably generates concern for individuals across our districts; for healthcare providers, for school administrators and staff, and for local businesses and restaurants. In short, across our community, people are concerned. And we are concerned, too- that's why we are strongly urging everyone over the age of two to wear a mask at indoor gatherings, continue to avoid crowds for the time being, and of course, for everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated if they have not yet done so.

We have heard a lot about boosters lately. On September 17, a subcommittee of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommended booster doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine for people who are older than 65 years and people who are at risk for severe disease associated with COVID-19 infection, but there are still a lot of steps that need to be taken before boosters become available in Virginia.

We need to remain patient as we let the process continue. The FDA needs to review the subcommittee's recommendations this week. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Advisory Committee of Immunization Practice needs to make their recommendations this week and then the CDC Director needs to approve those recommendations. Only then will the Virginia Department of Health provide guidance based on all of this information. Because we have this robust system of checks and balances in place, we can have confidence in the safety and the effectiveness of the three approved COVID-19 vaccines; and also, if it is approved, we can have confidence in the Pfizer booster shot. As we await these decisions, we and our vaccine partners (such as pharmacies and doctors' offices) have been preparing to make the booster shots available if they are approved.

It is important to know that if/when a booster dose is recommended for you, there is no rush to get it right away. If you are fully vaccinated, you still have strong protection against severe illness, hospitalization, and death, including against the Delta variant. Over the next few weeks, there will be plenty of vaccine available for anyone who is eligible.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to continue to focus on increasing the vaccination rates for people who are not yet fully vaccinated. The only way to get out of this pandemic and to reduce the risk of even more dangerous variants, is to have as many people fully vaccinated as possible. In the meantime, wear your mask when you are indoors, physical distance when you can, avoid crowds, and wash your hands. Regardless of where we come from, regardless of our beliefs, we are tired of COVID-19. We may be grieving, angry, or scared but we are not powerless. Together, and only together, we can beat the pandemic.