
Maura J. Rossman, M.D., Health Officer

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Dear Community,

Happy New Year! I know that the start of 2022 is not what anyone expected, nor wants. Over the holiday weeks, COVID-19 cases in Howard County continued to rise and the Omicron variant became dominant. Acute care hospitalizations increased due to the magnitude of cases, but thankfully ICU admissions rose at a lower rate. As of yesterday, the testing positivity rate in Howard County is 27.7% and the case rate 155.7/100,000. I am cautiously optimistic that the trend over the past week indicates a slowing of the rise in cases and a plateau of the positivity rate.

Vaccination among residents increased, with more residents getting boosters, including teens ages 12-15 who very recently became eligible. Currently 86% of residents 12 and older have completed their primary series, 61% of adults 18 and older have received their boosters, and 44% of children 5 -11 have completed their series. Howard County has the best vaccination rate in Maryland! Vaccination remains our best defense against COVID-19 and I urge everyone to complete their vaccination series, including getting a booster. Vaccine is plentiful and available in pharmacies, retail supermarkets, provider offices and Howard County Health Department (HCHD).

Demand for testing frustrated everyone over the holidays. Good news, today there are more testing venues available to residents due to Howard County Government partnerships with County providers. Testing capacity and supply should continue to increase over the next few weeks, including access to home testing kits. If you develop symptoms or are identified as a close contact, please get tested. Go to howardcountymd.gov/health/covid-19 for information on testing and vaccine sites.

While schools were closed, HCHD continued to work with Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) to enable continued, safe operating of in person learning. Studies show that schools have lower transmission compared to the community when mitigation strategies are implemented with fidelity. Given the concerning case rates and community transmission, layering of key strategies to prevent or limit secondary transmission of COVID-19 are needed to be implemented in HCPSS. These mitigation measures include vaccination, masks, physical distancing, cohorting, diagnostic and surveillance/screening testing, contact tracing in combination with quarantine, use of seating charts to identify contacts, timely data sharing with HCHD, postponement of high-risk activities when outbreaks are identified, limiting gathering events, and real time electronic sharing of case and contact data.

HCHD was recently notified that HCPSS will not conduct contact tracing and focus on case identification. HCHD will continue with community contact tracing but given our inability to access school-based information, HCHD cannot not assume responsibility for school-based contact tracing. However, given the importance of contact tracing in limiting transmission, HCHD has recommended additional strategies like screening testing be deployed across all schools, as well as the use of electronic data sharing to expedite information sharing. These strategies are critical to maintain in person learning for our children.

These are stressful times, but I know we will get through this together. Please remember:

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- **Get Vaccinated** as soon as you can and get a **Booster** when eligible.
- **Mask** if you are indoors in public places, around those whose vaccine status you don't know, or anywhere it's required.
- **Test** if you have been exposed or have symptoms, and **Quarantine** following CDC guidelines, as directed.
- **Isolate** if you test positive following CDC guidelines, as directed.
- **Wait** to gather with family and friends until you're all vaccinated, have received boosters, and can take a test before gathering.
- **Stay home** if you are not feeling well.
- **Smile and be compassionate.**

Thank you for doing your part to help us control the spread of COVID-19.



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