July 1, 2022

Dear Howard County Community,

Welcome summer! During the past month, COVID case rates, test positivity, and new hospitalization admissions due to COVID have fluctuated. We started the month with a high Community Level of COVID, dipped down to a low level and now are back up to a high level. As a reminder, COVID-19 Community Levels are categorized as low, medium, and high based on the number of COVID-19 cases in a given community and the impact of severe disease on community-based healthcare systems. This roller coaster pattern is a reminder that COVID-19 remains present in our community and we must continue with strategies to prevent severe illness and death. The virus continues to mutate, challenging our efforts and immune systems. The Omicron subvariants known as BA.4 and BA.5 are now spreading quickly in Maryland and Howard County. These subvariants are more highly transmissible but do not appear more virulent.

We are fortunate that strategies such as vaccines, masks, testing, and medications are available throughout the community to mitigate the impact of severe disease. Vaccination remains the most effective strategy and now individuals 6 months and older are eligible. If you have a child under age 5, please check with your pediatrician about vaccinating your child. If more convenient, HCHD offers all authorized vaccines for residents 6 months and older. Visit the [Howard County Vaccine Locator](#) to stay up to date with vaccines and boosters.

In addition to vaccination, the following COVID-19 layered prevention strategies to limit severe disease and reduce the potential for strain on the healthcare system are recommended, especially if traveling, participating in large events, or seeing family over the holiday weekend:

- Wear a well-fitting mask indoors in public, regardless of vaccination status.
- If you are immunocompromised or high risk for severe disease:
  - Wear a mask or respirator that provides you with greater protection.
  - Consider avoiding non-essential indoor activities in public where you could be exposed.
  - Have a plan for rapid testing if needed (e.g., having home tests or access to testing).
  - Talk to your healthcare provider about whether you are a candidate for treatments like oral antivirals, PrEP, and monoclonal antibodies.
- If you have household or social contact with someone at high risk for severe disease:
  - Consider self-testing to detect infection before contact.
  - Consider wearing a mask when indoors with them.
- Have a plan in case you or a family member become sick or get exposed:
  - Keep rapid antigen test kits at home and stay aware of available [Howard County COVID-19 Testing Sites](#).
  - Stay home if symptomatic and get tested with a PCR or rapid antigen test. If using a rapid antigen test and you test negative but are still symptomatic, repeat with another rapid antigen or PCR test.
  - Test if exposed to someone with COVID-19 according to the [CDC COVID-19 Testing Guidelines](#).
  - Quarantine after exposure to someone with COVID-19, if not up to date on vaccination.
  - Isolate if positive or symptomatic (without another diagnosis or negative test).
  - Follow [CDC Isolation and Quarantine Recommendations](#) for the duration of isolation and quarantine and wear a mask around others for 10 days.

Website: [www.hcehealth.org](http://www.hcehealth.org)  Facebook: [www.facebook.com/hocohealth](http://www.facebook.com/hocohealth)  Twitter: [@HoCoHealth](https://twitter.com/HoCoHealth)
Maura J. Rossman, M.D., Health Officer

- Contact your medical provider or go to https://covid-19-test-to-treat-locator-dhhs.hub.arcgis.com/ regarding potential treatment if you test positive.
- Visit the Howard County Vaccine Locator to stay up to date with vaccines and boosters to prevent severe illness, hospitalization, and death.

Thank you for your support and continued commitment to health, and best wishes for a safe and enjoyable July.

Maura J. Rossman, MD
Howard County Health Officer