

December 13, 2021

**HEALTH ADVISORY:**

Urgency of masking amid increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations

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This document will be updated as new information becomes available.

St. Louis County Department of Public Health (DPH) is now using 4 types of documents to provide important information to medical and public health professionals, and to other interested persons:

**Health Alerts** convey information of the highest level of importance which warrants immediate action or attention from Missouri health providers, emergency responders, public health agencies, and/or the public.

**Health Advisories** provide important information for a specific incident or situation, including that impacting neighboring states; may not require immediate action.

**Health Guidances** contain comprehensive information pertaining to a particular disease or condition, and include recommendations, guidelines, etc. endorsed by DPH.

**Health Updates** provide new or updated information on an incident or situation; can also provide information to update a previously sent Health Alert, Health Advisory, or Health Guidance; unlikely to require immediate action.

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**FROM: Dr. Faisal Khan, Acting Director  
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**SUBJECT: Urgency of masking amid increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations**

COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations are increasing at an alarming rate. The purpose of this advisory is to inform the public of this increase and urge the public to wear masks in addition to getting vaccinated to provide multiple layers of protection.

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, continues to circulate widely in the community, leading to illness, hospitalizations and deaths. Cases have been rising steadily since the end of October, and the test positivity rate is now over 10%, indicating that many people with infections are not getting tested. As of Dec. 9, at least 2,658 St. Louis County residents have died from COVID-19. The St. Louis Metropolitan Pandemic Task-force has reported a steep increase in hospitalizations in November and December and warned on Dec. 7 that hospitals are facing significant challenges caring for patients because of staffing shortages.

With the continued presence of the Delta variant and the emergence of the Omicron variant, it is more critical than ever that residents use multiple prevention methods to protect themselves, their loved ones and the community at large. It is

DPH's strong recommendation is that residents continue to wear a face covering in indoor public places or crowded outdoor spaces when other people are present, even if you are vaccinated (including but not limited to when at school, work, businesses and restaurants), in addition to practicing social distancing, getting vaccinated and maintaining other CDC-recommended measures to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2. Early data show that vaccine boosters are particularly effective, especially with the new Omicron variant, and anyone eligible for a booster should schedule one.

Evidence confirming that masks are effective in preventing the spread of COVID-19 continues to accumulate. In addition to the abundance of observational studies, a randomized control trial has provided further proof that use of masks on the community level reduces transmission. In Missouri from April 2021 to October 2021, jurisdictions with mask mandates experienced an average of 15.8 cases per day for every 100,000 residents compared to 21.7 cases per day for every 100,000 residents in unmasked communities.

CDC emphasizes the importance of layering prevention measures and recommends that all people over the age of 2 wear a mask in indoor public places regardless of vaccination status in areas with substantial or high community transmission of the virus. For St. Louis County, CDC considers "substantial transmission" to be any more than about 75 new cases per day and "high transmission" to be any more than about 145 new cases per day. As of Dec. 9, 344 new cases per day were being reported.

The more layers of protection used, including wearing a face covering, getting vaccinated and social distancing, the safer communities will be.