

## **Letter to the Community: December 23, 2021**

Hello Thurston County! The omicron variant is spreading across the United States at a much more rapid pace than the delta variant, subsequently, causing an exponential rise in COVID-19 cases in countries around the world. The CDC reported that 73% of new cases in the US are caused by the omicron variant. This is thought to be due to an increase in the virus transmissibility as well as its potential to reinfect people who were previously infected with COVID-19. This is also causing an increased risk of breakthrough infections in people who are vaccinated. Vaccines appear to prevent severe illness and death for those who are fully vaccinated, and people who have received a booster dose are at significantly decreased risk of infection with omicron.

Omicron spreads the way previous variants have spread, through droplets and aerosols. This means that during this holiday season it is even more important to stay vigilant. Holidays are a time when many people gather to celebrate and with omicron spreading, minimizing gatherings with people not in your household is important. If you choose to attend a gathering, wear a mask and maintain six feet or more of distance between yourself and others where possible. Stay home if you have symptoms of COVID-19 regardless of your vaccination status. These measures are still effective and help prevent infection and spread of COVID-19 if you become ill.

Some events may require proof of vaccination and/or a negative COVID-19 test prior to attending. Get tested if you have any symptoms of COVID-19, and test 5-7 days after a potential exposure to help prevent spread of disease. The best way to protect yourself and your community from COVID-19 is by getting vaccinated and receiving boosters when you become eligible. If you haven't been vaccinated yet or received your booster, please do so as soon as possible.

In general, smaller gatherings are safer than larger ones and outside gatherings are safer than indoor ones. It is always important to avoid crowded, poorly ventilated indoor spaces and opening windows can improve ventilation. When gathering consider the safety of those at high-risk of severe disease, including those who are immunocompromised or have other comorbidities. Some people may choose to mask indoors even in private settings to further protect themselves or others in the high-risk category. Children under five are not yet eligible for vaccine, so consider masks for children over age two and maintain healthy hand hygiene. While it may not always be possible, testing within 72 hours of gathering and isolating if positive can add an additional level of protection, especially if performed the day of the gathering.

CDC guidance for the holidays can be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays/celebrations.html>

Washington State Department of Health Safer Gathering Checklist can be found here: <https://coronavirus.wa.gov/information-for/you-and-your-family/safer-gatherings>

Information on testing locations in Thurston County can be found here: <https://www.thurstoncountywa.gov/phss/Coronavirus/Pages/coronavirus-STC.aspx>

While this is not where we hoped we would be at this point in the pandemic and we are still learning about omicron, if we work together to keep ourselves and our communities safe, I know we can meet this challenge and make it to the other side.

Wishing you the best of health,

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH  
Health Officer, Thurston County