



## Travis County Medical Society



July 13, 2021

Dear Colleagues:

We have all spent these past eighteen months working together to treat our patients' medical problems and learn about a new disease entity in the midst of a pandemic. Although I am new to Travis County, in my previous role as Health Authority in Bastrop County, I experienced many of the same challenges.

The seriousness of the Delta variant is sobering and, as the new Health Authority for Travis County, I want to share what we are seeing, what we know, and what we can do.

After the July fourth festivities, we are seeing a slow increase in the number of positive cases in Travis County. Fortunately, seventy percent of the population has received at least one dose of vaccine. We are in the midst of a rapid rise in cases of COVID-19 and it is important to encourage our patients to get vaccinated.

What do we know about the Delta variant?

Initially emerging from India, the Delta variant is now present in over 98 countries. The Delta variant quickly displaced all other variants in the United Kingdom in a matter of weeks. Published data from the UK indicates that the Delta variant is 40-60% more transmissible than the Alpha (or UK variant), which itself is about 50% more transmissible than the original strain of COVID.

Put another way, while the original COVID virus had a R-naught ( $R_0$ ) of 2.5, the Delta virus has a  $R_0$  between 5 and 8. The  $R_0$  represents the number of additional people that become infected from a single case. This variant is now estimated to account for approximately 52% of all new COVID cases across the United States. The Delta variant also seems to be more severe than previous strains, resulting in an approximate doubling of the risk for hospitalization compared to the Alpha variant.

What do we know about the vaccines?

The good news is that the vaccines we currently have in the United States are still effective, especially for severe disease. Data for the Pfizer vaccine, for example, indicates it is still approximately 93%

effective in preventing severe disease and hospitalization from the Delta variant. Its effectiveness in preventing all symptomatic infections from the Delta variant decreases to between 64% and 83%, depending on the study.

Clearly, the data still show that vaccination with any of the approved COVID-19 vaccines is the best defense. Among the 30% of our population who still have not received a first dose, some may be die-hard resisters. But many more are just hesitant or fearful due to misinformation or lack of knowledge, and many of them will respond to education and trusted data on the science. Please educate patients about the safety of the COVID-19 vaccines.

We know the benefit of vaccination far outweighs the risk of serious side effects (~1 in 100,000). We also know that these rare events are greatly overshadowed by the rates of severe COVID-19 and long COVID.

We know that vaccination protects most individuals from getting or spreading COVID-19, especially if they continue to wear masks indoors in crowded spaces with unvaccinated people, wash hands regularly, watch their distance and stay home when they are sick.

We know vaccination protects virtually all individuals from serious illness, hospitalization, and death.

As a medical community, what can we do with what we know?

- Lead by example: get yourself and your staff vaccinated.
- Encourage your patients to get vaccinated now.
- Encourage those who have only received one dose of a two-dose regimen to come in and get their second dose.
- Continue to think, and test for, COVID.
- If you have patients with COVID that are at risk of developing severe disease and are in the early stages of the disease, encourage them to consider monoclonal antibody therapy.
- Continue to follow the local public health data and your advice, and where that data can be found: COVID-19 Dashboards | AustinTexas.gov

With school starting in the fall and many unvaccinated in our community, I ask for your help and support in our efforts to get all our patients vaccinated.

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