

# PROVIDER ALERT

Alert # 6.21.9

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## Beacon Health Options COVID-19 Guidelines: Update at 18 Months

Beacon created COVID-19 guidelines for ambulatory and congregate care services that were periodically updated between July 2020 and February 2021. Rather than revising those documents again, we have created a new document that highlights the developments we have seen in the past six months.

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At Beacon Health Options we strive to share the most up-to-date COVID-19 information to support our Provider Community in the delivery of valuable services to those we all serve. While you do not have to adopt any specific protocol, we expect that providers will have policies that take adequate steps to protect their staff and the community.

As with previous Beacon Health Options Pennsylvania COVID-19 Guidelines, this update is intended to present an aggregation of information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, academic institutions and other reliable sources. Selected references are listed at the end of this document.

### Summary of Recent Events

- As of late August, 2021, COVID-19 has infected over 38 million Americans and killed over 630,000 of them. Worldwide, there have been over 213 million cases and about 4.5 million deaths.
- Although the numbers of new infections in much of the US (including Pennsylvania) are much better than seen in earlier waves of infection, parts of the country with low vaccination rates are experiencing very high rates of infection.
- Currently, the *delta variant* of the SARS-CoV-2 virus predominates in the US. It is more contagious, more deadly and more resistant to the immunity conferred by vaccination than earlier strains were.
- Although the 3 currently available vaccines still provide good protection against severe COVID-19 infection, fully vaccinated people may carry the delta variant and transmit it to others. This is why some recommendations that had previously been removed for the vaccinated (face masks, distancing) are now recommended again.
- Even though the vaccinations do not provide 100% protection, unvaccinated people are about 5 times more likely to become infected and 30 times more likely to be

hospitalized than fully vaccinated people. More than 99% of all COVID-19 deaths are now among unvaccinated people.

- The immunity from vaccination is much stronger and longer lasting than immunity acquired from having contracted COVID-19. It is strongly recommended that those who have had COVID-19 in the past still get vaccinated.
- The Pfizer BioNTech vaccine has received full FDA approval for those 16 and older, and is also available for those 12-15. The Moderna vaccine is available for those 12 and up and the Johnson and Johnson vaccine for those 18 and older. Both are expected to receive full FDA approval in the coming weeks.
- Vaccines are expected to become available to those 11 and under this fall.
- Recent studies have shown that immunity from all 3 vaccines tends to fade over time. It is now recommended the immunocompromised individuals (such as transplant recipients and cancer patients) get a third dose of the Pfizer or Moderna product. Beginning on Sept. 20, all of those who are 8 months out from their second Pfizer or Moderna dose may get a third or 'booster' injection. Recent data shows that a second dose of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine is also beneficial but it is not yet available as a booster.
- Increasing numbers of private companies, particularly healthcare facilities, are requiring that their employees be vaccinated. Many companies are now requiring proof of vaccination to enter their facilities, including concert venues, sporting events and cruise ships. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has announced that nursing homes must vaccinate all employees in order to continue to receive Medicare and Medicaid funding. This may be expanded to other types of healthcare facilities in the future.

### **What Happens Next?**

- Ending the pandemic would require that a large percentage of the population be immune to the virus through vaccination ("herd immunity"). For the delta variant, which is more contagious than its predecessors, about 85% of the population would need to be vaccinated. Currently, less than 52% of the US population is fully vaccinated and reaching 85% seems very unlikely.
- With a failure to reach herd immunity level, we can expect to have continued outbreaks of COVID-19 well into the future, particularly in parts of the country with low levels of vaccination. The disease is likely to become endemic with recurrent outbreaks, like seasonal influenza, and may require periodic revaccination.
- As the virus continues to spread and proliferate, it is likely that we will see the emergence of more variants that are even more contagious, more deadly and more resistant to the immunity conferred by vaccination than we are seeing currently.

## What Should We Be Doing Now?

- Programs and facilities should still be screening staff, patients and others entering their facilities (including those who are vaccinated) for recent exposure to COVID-19 or symptoms of COVID-19.
- All patients and staff in residential facilities should still have their temperature checked daily.
- Whenever possible, all staff and patients should wear face coverings (multi-layer cloth mask, surgical mask or N95 respirator) when indoors. This includes fully vaccinated individuals.
- Every effort should be made to improve airflow and ventilation in all indoor areas. The virus that causes COVID-19 is airborne and transmitted by aerosolized droplets and this may be the most effective preventative measure, aside from vaccination and masking.
- Plastic or plexi-glass barriers do not appear to be helpful and may reduce airflow.
- Strict hand-washing and sanitizing surfaces has little effect on the spread of COVID-19, as transmission from surface contact is very rare. However, this is very helpful for other viruses, such as influenza, and is still encouraged.
- When people must be indoors, particularly for extended periods of time, keeping six feet apart is still recommended.
- Non-employee visitors and therapeutic passes should still be discouraged as much as possible.
- Visiting by teleconference and the use of telehealth should be encouraged as much as possible.
- All patients and staff who have been exposed to COVID-19 or who show symptoms of the illness should be tested, preferably by a RT-PCR test. If the test is positive, all patients and staff would have had significant contact with that individual should also be tested.
- Those who test positive should be isolated for 10 days. If they are more severely ill or immunocompromised, a longer isolation period may be required.
- Residential facilities that have a patient or staff member test positive for COVID-19 should halt admissions until the outbreak is contained and for at least 10 days.

If you have questions or concerns about this information and these suggestions, please contact your Provider Field Coordinator.

Please try to stay safe during these challenging times,



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As a provider, you are accountable for the information in this alert and when applicable, it will be incorporated into the Beacon Health Options of Pennsylvania Provider Manual.

### **Selected References:**

#### **COVID-19 Statistics:**

<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

[https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html?name=style-coronavirus&region=TOP\\_BANNER&block=storyline\\_menu\\_recirc&action=click&pgtype=Interactive&variant=1\\_Show&is\\_new=false](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html?name=style-coronavirus&region=TOP_BANNER&block=storyline_menu_recirc&action=click&pgtype=Interactive&variant=1_Show&is_new=false)

<https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>

#### **SARS-CoV-2 Variants:**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/variant.html>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/expert-answers/covid-variant/faq-20505779>

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/a-new-strain-of-coronavirus-what-you-should-know>

#### **Vaccinations:**

<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2021/why-covid-19-vaccines-offer-better-protection-than-infection>

<https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-approves-first-covid-19-vaccine>

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/index.html>

[https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/facts.html?s\\_cid=11352:covid%20vaccination%20mandates:sem.ga:p:RG:GM:gen:PTN:FY21](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/facts.html?s_cid=11352:covid%20vaccination%20mandates:sem.ga:p:RG:GM:gen:PTN:FY21)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/25/health/johnson-johnson-vaccine-booster-shot.html>

#### **Vaccination Requirements:**

<https://www.cms.gov/newsroom/press-releases/biden-harris-administration-takes-additional-action-protect-americas-nursing-home-residents-covid-19>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/here-are-companies-mandating-vaccines-all-or-some-employees-n1275808>

<https://www.eeoc.gov/wysk/what-you-should-know-about-covid-19-and-ada-rehabilitation-act-and-other-eeo-laws>

#### **Herd Immunity:**

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00728-2>

<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2021/what-is-herd-immunity-and-how-can-we-achieve-it-with-covid-19>

#### **Mitigation Strategies:**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/global-covid-19/global-urban-areas.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/19/well/live/coronavirus-restaurants-classrooms-salons.html>