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## **VDH Urges Virginians to Get Vaccinated and Boosted and to Practice Mitigation Steps as Omicron Variant Fuels Surge in COVID-19 Cases in Virginia, United States**

**(Richmond, Va.)** — Today, with 4,437 new COVID-19 cases being [recorded](#) in the Commonwealth and the number of Virginians hospitalized with COVID-19 rising, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is urging all Virginians to take steps to protect themselves and those around them. Yesterday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that based on latest projections they predict the Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is now the dominant variant in the United States.

CDC [released surveillance data](#) that indicates the Omicron variant represents about 73% of COVID-19 cases in the U.S. for the week ending Dec. 18, an increase from the week ending Dec. 11. In the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Region 3, which includes Virginia, CDC data indicates Omicron represents 75.8% of cases.

“The speed with which Omicron is spreading underscores the threat this variant represents due to the number of Virginians who could become infected in a short time,” said **State Health Commissioner M. Norman Oliver, MD, MA**. “Omicron is spreading at a faster rate than any other SARS-CoV-2 variant to date. A rapid increase in COVID-19 cases will put significant stress on our healthcare delivery system. The vaccines we have now are expected to protect against severe illness, hospitalization, and death due to infection with the Omicron variant, especially among those who have received their booster dose. If you’re not vaccinated or have not gotten your booster dose, now is the time to do so.”

Vaccine breakthrough cases are expected, so in addition to getting vaccinated, it is important to take additional precautions when cases are surging, including wearing a mask in public indoor spaces. “The risk is real, and we have in our hands the tools we need to protect ourselves, our loved ones and our community. This is a critical moment in our battle against the virus,” Dr. Oliver said.

While the increase in cases was expected, based on Omicron’s behavior in other nations worldwide including South Africa, Germany and the United Kingdom, the important thing to keep in mind is that the layered strategies that have proved effective in past surges are still effective against Omicron:

- Get vaccinated against COVID-19 now.
- Get your booster dose now.
- Wear a mask in public indoor spaces, regardless of vaccination status.
- During the holiday season, [consider taking a COVID-19 test](#) prior to gathering with others, especially if you plan to visit with people who are vulnerable or at high risk for severe illness if they develop COVID-19.

Omicron is different because it has both a high number of mutations and an unusual combination of mutations. Some of these are associated with immune escape potential and higher transmissibility.

There is a lot of information that we are still learning about Omicron and its key features. Researchers around the world are conducting studies and will continue to share the findings as they become available. More data are needed to know if Omicron infections, and especially reinfections and breakthrough infections in people who are fully vaccinated, cause more severe illness or death than infection with other variants. We will learn more information in the coming days and weeks.

Those who are unvaccinated remain at the highest risk of severe illness and hospitalization due to COVID-19. This population remains VDH's top priority. Everyone 5 years or older is eligible to be vaccinated. Vaccines are available at pharmacies, doctors' offices and many other convenient locations. **To find free vaccines at a Community Vaccination Center or another location near you, visit [vaccinate.virginia.gov](https://vaccinate.virginia.gov) or call 877-VAX-IN-VA (877-829-4682, TTY users call 7-1-1). Assistance is available in English, Spanish, and more than 100 other languages.** At Community Vaccination Centers, appointments are encouraged to ensure you get the vaccine you want and to avoid extended wait times, but walk-ins are welcome.

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