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COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

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Stewards for Optimum
Community Health

By Noelle Bissell, M.D., director, New River Health District and interim director, Cumberland Plateau, Lenowisco and Mount Rogers Health Districts

COVID-19 is surging in southwest Virginia. Friday's daily brief from Ballad Health offers some sobering statistics:

- Positive COVID-19 cases have increased more than 800% since July 4.
- We have had more than 2,200 new cases in the past seven days (prior to Friday). Thursday, we saw 615 new cases, the highest daily tally since January 2021.
- 32% of the cases are in children under the age of 18.
- COVID-19 hospitalizations have increased more than 650% since July 4.
- Positivity (test results that are positive) is 14.7%. Last month, it was 3.4%.
- Nearly 95% of Ballad Health's hospitalized COVID-19 patients are unvaccinated.
- More than 61% of people in the Appalachian Highlands are not fully vaccinated.

Simple numbers bear this out ([hyperlink: www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/covid-19-data-insights/covid-19-cases-by-vaccination-status/](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/covid-19-data-insights/covid-19-cases-by-vaccination-status/)). We know that 96 to 98 percent of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths have occurred in those who are NOT fully vaccinated. Conversely, fewer than one tenth of one percent of cases, hospitalizations and deaths have been found in those who ARE fully vaccinated.

To stop the pandemic and to protect your loved ones, get vaccinated and encourage your family and friends to do the same. Vaccinated people can get COVID, and they can feel quite ill - like the flu - but they are very well protected against severe disease, hospitalization and death. According to Dr. Anthony Fauci and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the unvaccinated are three times more likely to get infected, eight times more likely to have symptoms and 25 times more likely to be hospitalized.

Locally and nationally, the majority of children who are hospitalized for COVID-19 are not vaccinated or their parents are not vaccinated. We know that a significant amount of transmission occurs in the home where people are more relaxed.

This past week alone, the Cumberland Plateau Health District tallied the same number of children that were positive for COVID-19 as in the entire month of July. In the Lenowisco Health District, last week's children's case count was more than 15 percent higher than the entire month of July. Since vaccines are not available for children younger than 12, parents of younger children can help protect their children by getting vaccinated. Older children should be vaccinated as well, for all the same reasons.

Unlike the flu, COVID-19 kills in exponentially higher numbers, 10 to 50 times higher. While 619,000 Americans have died so far from COVID-19, the CDC estimates there are 12,000 to 61,000 flu-related deaths each year. (hyperlink: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/burden/index.html>)

Vaccines save millions of lives every year. They were developed to prevent death and disability from infection, and are one of the greatest public health discoveries ever.

The history of vaccines shows them to be very safe and effective. Adverse effects are extremely rare. When they occur they usually last only days or weeks; not months or years like the long-term effects of the diseases they prevent. Vaccines stimulate the immune response, and then break down and are cleared from the body within days. Viruses can linger in the body for months or years, causing debilitating conditions. Falling ill with COVID-19 or any other preventable infection poses a much more common and much more serious risk of long-term adverse health effects, compared to the rare and short-term effects of vaccines.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to hit unvaccinated individuals the hardest. If vaccinated people get sick, their cases are usually mild and rarely result in hospitalization or death. In public health, that's a win.

Those who get infected with the Delta variant usually carry substantial virus loads and pose a high risk of transmitting COVID-19 to unvaccinated people. We encourage everyone to get vaccinated, mask up and keep your distance.

Some of our local doctors in southwest Virginia are speaking out (hyperlink: www.nrvroadtowellness.com/news). These are those who are on the front lines, fighting tirelessly every day - sometimes with no cooperation or appreciation from patients - to get us well and keep us well. They all deserve our trust and our gratitude.

Many of our healthcare workers - those we rely on to care for us and our families - are worn out and stressed, and we cannot afford to lose them. They go to work every day, see the devastation and hold the hands of those who are dying because family can't be present. They do this because they are trained to give care to those in need, and they do their best with what they have, knowing there are limited treatments for COVID-19, and no cure.

This surge is entirely preventable and healthcare workers feel as if their community is letting them down. Many view the rejection of vaccines as betrayal, when they can see a potential end to the exhaustion, loss and sacrifice. "What makes me the most angry is that people will reject science right up until the second they need everything I have to keep them alive, and then they feel they can come to our door and be entitled to all of that help and hard work," said one. And, "We have always held up our end of the bargain, but is society fulfilling its end?"

Most of the country is now experiencing high levels of transmission, in some cases exceeding last winter's levels. Hospitals are postponing or deferring elective surgeries and even some admissions; some hospitals have no available beds. These shortages impact everyone's health care. Hospitals are seeing pent-up demand because of people who put off care over the past 19 months, and people are coming in sicker with other illnesses. COVID-19 is pushing them to the tipping point.

It doesn't have to be this way. You can make it stop. We can make it stop. Please get vaccinated if you are eligible.