

PRINT-Increased holiday travel represents higher risk for COVID-19, especially for the unvaccinated

Most counties in Illinois are considered as having a high COVID-19 transmission rate and Michigan recently reported its highest single-day positivity rate since the start of the pandemic. That's a recipe for concern among health leaders as the holidays approach.

The Triple-A Motor Club predicts travel this Thanksgiving will hit pre-pandemic levels. The extremely contagious delta variant, combined with 40% of the population nationwide still unvaccinated, has health leaders worried about a post-holiday surge in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and even deaths.

The number of COVID-19-related hospitalizations are back up among the 15 hospitals in the OSF HealthCare Ministry. A majority of the individuals who've been admitted with COVID-19 are unvaccinated.

Stephen Hippler, MD, chief clinical officer for OSF HealthCare, warns those who are not vaccinated face a higher risk if they travel this Thanksgiving or during the holiday season.

"Those who remain susceptible, because they are not vaccinated, really are at a higher risk of not only acquiring COVID-19, but being hospitalized and dying."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends those who are unvaccinated avoid travel altogether this holiday season, but if travel is absolutely necessary, unvaccinated individuals should get tested before and after the trip.

Dr. Hippler says that test is just a snapshot in time and there are risks of exposure in public places throughout a trip.

Some argue against vaccination because people who are fully vaccinated are acquiring the virus. Dr. Hippler says even so, the vaccines are working to keep people out of the hospital.

"The fact of the matter is, we're not seeing the same degree of hospitalization and death and that's truly what the vaccines are intended to do – to prevent hospitalization, severe disease and death. And, so far even with the variants, the vaccines we have available have shown to be very effective at preventing hospitalizations and deaths."

Infectious disease experts say as more people gather indoors among drier air, a higher percentage of virus particles circulate, including those that cause the respiratory illness RSV in children and vulnerable adults, pneumonia, influenza and COVID-19. Dr. Hippler says because many holiday gatherings are indoors, people need to get vaccinated for COVID-19 as well as for those other preventable illnesses.

"Getting the booster to help boost our immunity for those who are vaccinated, getting the primary series for those who have not, and really getting our kids vaccinated to prevent them from getting sick, our community from getting sick, and spreading it to others."

OSF HealthCare believes vaccination against COVID-19 is our greatest tool to help end the pandemic and Dr. Hippler says that means becoming fully vaccinated and boosted however possible.

"I would recommend that whenever it's convenient for you, and wherever you can find it – they're the same vaccine that you get in any community – so find a shot and get the vaccinations you need."

For information about vaccination clinics for kids ages 5-11, or to schedule a COVID-19 or other vaccination or booster shot, visit osfhealthcare.org/covid19/vaccine.