

Thursday, Dec. 30, 2021

## Mayor's Update



As this year ends, I report with a heavy heart the loss of another three Newtonians who died with COVID-19. We have now lost 223 of our family members, friends and neighbors to this pandemic.

Newton-Wellesley Hospital, as of Wednesday, Dec. 29, reports they are caring for a total of 25 patients hospitalized with COVID-19, two of whom are in the Intensive Care Unit. This is a decrease from the 36 patients hospitalized with the virus one week earlier. The hospital reports that the number of these patients who are unvaccinated remains at approximately two-thirds.

Over the 15 days from Dec. 15 to 29, our positive case numbers in Newton have dramatically soared. We had 1,124 confirmed cases, the highest number of new cases in a two week period ever, bringing our cumulative total to 7,360.

Our positivity rate in Newton is now 3.3%, up from 1.1% two weeks ago. (The State's rate is now 7.74%.)

The daily average incident rate in Newton, which measures the number of cases per 100,000 population, is now 57.3, up from the 24.0 two weeks ago. (The State's rate is now 83.)

### COVID-19 in Newton

**Total Cases**  
**7,360**

**Total Deaths**  
**223**

*\*As of 12/29/21*

You may notice this week that we're switched the order of how we're reporting Newton's COVID data. Instead of first reporting the number of cases as I have since the pandemic began, We're starting by focusing on the number of people who require hospital care and the number of people who died with the virus.

This is an intentional shift. We're following the lead of Newton resident Dr. Ashish Jha, an infectious disease expert and member of the Newton School Medical Advisory Board. He explained recently that prior to having vaccines, as case numbers went up, we inevitably saw the number of hospitalizations and deaths soon rise as well.

What we're seeing now is that for those of us who are vaccinated, and particularly boosted, we may get infected, but are unlikely to get seriously ill. As Dr. Jha said, "It might be a couple days of not feeling so great, but you're gonna bounce back. That's very different than what we have seen in the past."

Another Newtonian, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky, said this morning that the seven-day rolling average of new cases in the United States is about 240,000, up by 60% from last week, while hospitalizations rose by just 14%. She also noted that Omicron appears to be causing milder symptoms, especially in those who are vaccinated.

In a community like ours where the overwhelming majority (95%) of people are vaccinated, we can see that the high number of new cases is thankfully not reflected in a dramatic rise in COVID hospitalizations or deaths.

#### Updated COVID-19 Isolation and Quarantine Guidance

On Tuesday, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) shortened the recommended time for isolation for people with COVID-19 and updated the quarantine period for those exposed to someone with COVID-19. The CDC made the changes due to our evolving understanding of COVID-19 and the Omicron variant.

Current evidence shows that the majority of transmission occurs early in the course of illness, generally one to two days prior to symptom onset and two to three days after.

Isolating for a minimum of five days after symptom onset (or test date if the person has no symptoms) keeps the infected individual away from others when they are most contagious and the risk of them infecting others is highest. In shortening the isolation period, the CDC recognizes that isolation of infected individuals is only one part of a layered risk reduction strategy that includes vaccines and boosters, wearing of [well-fitting masks](#), testing, staying home when sick, and avoiding crowds.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) has [adopted the CDC's updated guidelines](#).

Please note that the updated isolation period for individuals with COVID-19 applies to students in kindergarten through grade 12. At this time, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) quarantine guidance for close contacts remains unchanged. DESE is updating its guidance, which will be reviewed by the Newton Public Schools and Newton's Health and Human Services Department once available.

A summary of the updated isolation and quarantine guidance is below. See the [state's website](#) for full details.

If you test positive for COVID-19:

- Stay home for 5 days
- If you have no symptoms or your symptoms are resolving after 5 days, you can leave your home, but you must continue to wear a [well-fitting mask](#) around others for 5 additional days

If you are a close contact of someone with COVID-19:

- If you have been boosted OR completed the primary series of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine within the last 6 months OR completed the primary series of J&J vaccine within the last 2 months:
  - Wear a [well-fitting mask](#) around others for 10 days
  - Test on day 5, if possible
  - If you develop symptoms get a test and stay home
- If you completed the primary series of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine over 6 months ago and are not boosted OR completed the primary series of J&J vaccine over 2 months ago and are not boosted OR are unvaccinated:
  - Stay home for 5 days. After that continue to wear a [well-fitting mask](#) around others for 5 additional days.
  - Test on day 5, if possible
  - If you develop symptoms get a test and stay home

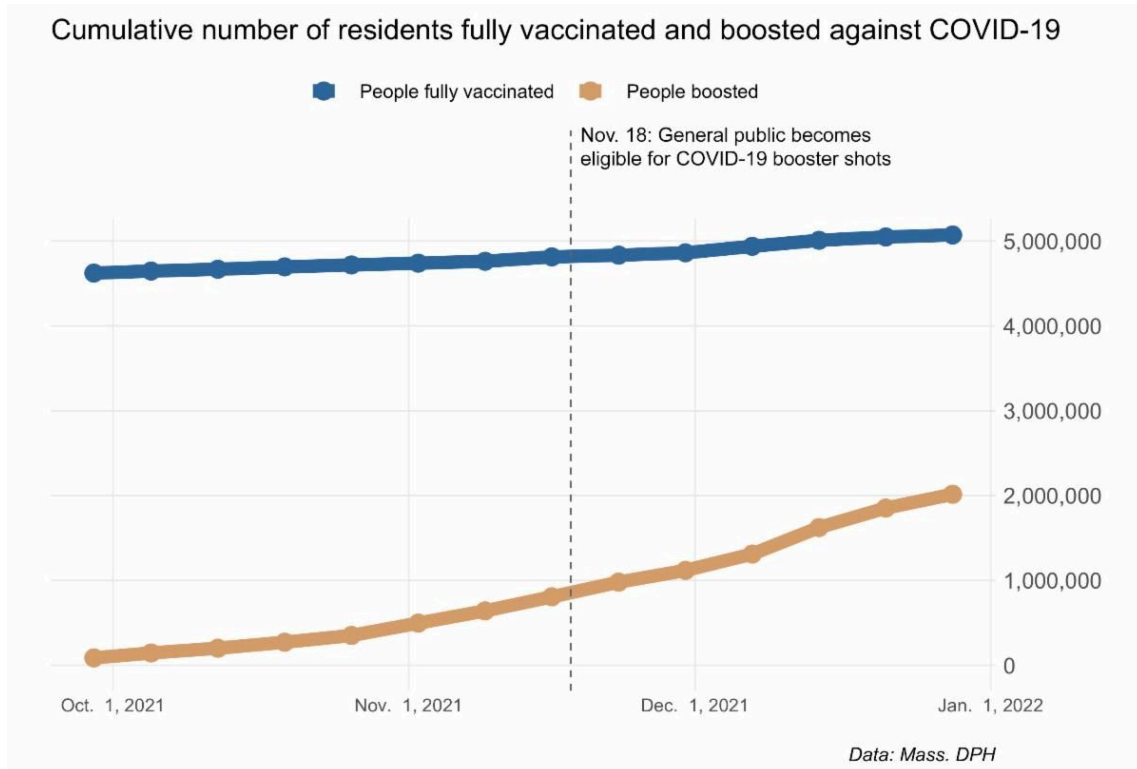
### Additional COVID-19 Updates

Omicron is spreading: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the highly contagious Omicron variant made up [59% of cases](#) during the week of Dec. 19 to 25 (up from an estimated 23% during the week of Dec. 12 to 18 and 7% during the week of Dec. 5 to 11).

Vaccines and Boosters are important: While we are seeing breakthrough cases (infections in vaccinated individuals), vaccines and especially boosters still provide protection against infection and serious illness. The [CDC reports](#) that vaccine effectiveness against infection for two doses of an mRNA vaccine (Pfizer or Moderna) is approximately 35% and a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose restores vaccine effectiveness against infection to 75%. For those breakthrough cases that do occur, vaccines are highly effective at preventing severe illness, hospitalization, and death. The MDPH reports that [97% of COVID-19 cases](#) in vaccinated

individuals have not resulted in hospitalization or death. Get vaccinated. Get boosted.

### Vaccinated Individuals in Massachusetts



### COVID-19 Testing

#### *Accessing Testing*

We recognize there is a large demand for testing; it's a useful, additional layer of risk reduction.

A searchable database of testing sites across the state, including Newton, can be found at [mass.gov/gettested](https://mass.gov/gettested). Plug in a zip code and you can filter by distance, cost of the test, type of test, and more under "Advanced Filters."

[CIC Health](#) continues to operate a site at Riverside in Newton.

Free home PCR tests are available to eligible Massachusetts adults. Kits are reserved for adults (18+) who live or work in a congregate setting, are experiencing symptoms, have recently been exposed to someone with COVID-19, or who have

otherwise been recommended for testing. Please visit the [Pixel by LabCorp](#) webpage for Massachusetts for details, and to request a test kit.

Wondering when to use a home test and how to interpret the results? Click [here](#) for a guide.

### *Newton Not Included in Governor Baker's Free Rapid Test Distribution*

[Gov. Baker announced](#) earlier this month that 2.1 million rapid antigen tests would be delivered to 102 cities and towns with the highest percentage of families below the federal poverty level. Newton was not included as one of those communities.

Yesterday Gov. Baker announced the State had reached a deal to provide cities and towns with discounted bulk shipments of rapid test kits.

We placed our first order this afternoon and plan to begin distribution as soon as possible with a focus on free access for low-income and vulnerable residents.

### *Newton Public School (NPS) Testing*

NPS will continue to provide symptomatic and Test and Stay COVID-19 testing to all students and staff in all grades, PreK to 12+. Weekly pool testing for students in grades PreK to 6 and staff in grades PreK to 8 is continuing. NPS is currently in discussions with their COVID-19 testing contractors to provide weekly pool testing to high school and Education Center staff and will hope to start soon.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education announced yesterday that it is providing 200,000 at-home rapid antigen tests to school districts to distribute to teachers and staff. NPS leadership is working on plans to distribute the tests over the weekend and on Monday. While the State provided tests for NPS teachers and staff, unfortunately they did not give us access to test kits for our students to be tested before school reopens after vacation on Monday.

### *Impact of COVID-19 Variants on Testing*

Genetic mutations in the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19, impacts the accuracy of COVID-19 diagnostic (PCR and antigen) tests. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which issues Emergency Use Authorization for COVID-19 tests, continually monitors test performance.

Early data suggests that rapid antigen tests do detect the Omicron variant but may have reduced sensitivity. Sensitivity refers to a test's ability to identify an individual with disease as positive. Lower sensitivity means more false negatives, i.e., people

who are infected but test negative. Antigen tests are generally less sensitive than PCR tests. Individuals who have symptoms or a known exposure and who test negative with an antigen test, including at-home antigen tests, should follow up with a PCR test.

The FDA has identified two molecular tests that are expected to fail to detect Omicron: Meridian Bioscience Revogene SARS-CoV-2 and Applied DNA Science Linea COVID-19 Assay Kit. The FDA recommends that these tests not be used until this issue is resolved.

Learn more from the [FDA](#).

### Additional State Vaccine and Booster Sites

Five additional state sponsored COVID-19 vaccine and booster locations will be opening in early January where all eligible residents aged 5 and older will be able to receive their primary series and residents aged 16 and older will be able to receive their booster shots.

Appointments are available now at [vaxfinder.mass.gov](https://vaxfinder.mass.gov) and all locations except for the Taunton COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic accept walk ins. Language translation services will be available on site at all locations.

- Fenway Park (4 Jersey St, Boston), opening Jan 6. Administering primary series for individuals 5+ as well as boosters.
- Melnea Cass Recreation Complex (120 MLK Jr Blvd, Boston), opening Jan 5. Administering Pfizer primary series for individuals 5+ as well as Pfizer boosters.
- Whittier Street Health Center (1290 Tremont St, Roxbury), open now. Administering primary series for individuals 5+ as well as boosters.
- North Shore Community College, Modular Building (300 Broad St, Lynn), opening Jan 5. Administering primary series for individuals 5+ as well as boosters.
- Taunton COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic (2005 Bay St, Taunton), opening Jan 6. Administering primary series for individuals 5+ as well as boosters.

### Flu Info

Flu season has begun. In Massachusetts, flu activity is moderate and steadily increasing, including hospitalizations due to flu. Flu vaccination is the best way to

prevent flu and its potentially serious complications. [Click here](#) for the state's weekly flu report and [click here](#) to learn more about the flu, including a list of places in Newton offering the flu vaccine.

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## Beginning the New Year

This Saturday, Jan. 1 at noon I will take the oath of office from Newton resident Chief Justice Kimberly Budd to begin serving my second term as Mayor. I will then in turn administer the oath to members of our Newton City Council and School Committee.

As with so many ceremonies and celebrations over the course of the pandemic, this inauguration is different than in the past. We will assemble not in the City Council Chamber seated side by side as has been our tradition. Rather we will be in the more spacious Newton North auditorium, masked, and physically distanced.

I know I speak for all of my colleagues in elected government when I say we are honored to be entrusted by the voters of Newton with leading this good City, especially in this period filled with challenges.

The ceremony is being broadcast live on NewTV, Comcast 9 • RCN 13, 629 (HD) or Verizon 33.

Wishing you all a happy and safe new year.

Warmly,

Ruthanne

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