

Delta variant of COVID-19 in Umatilla County

By Bryce Dole and Carlos Fuentes
EO Media Group

UMATILLA COUNTY — The delta variant has arrived in Eastern Oregon.

And with vaccination rates across the region lagging behind the state, the question for health experts is not if the latest and most contagious strain of COVID-19 will spread through communities, but how large the outbreak will be.

"It's not a question for unvaccinated people if they're going to get the virus," said Dr. Jon Hitzman, Umatilla County's public health officer. "It's when they're going to get it and how sick they're going to get."

The state has reported 14 delta cases so far and three in the Oregon Health Authority's Region 9, an area that encompasses Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker

and Malheur counties. Each of those cases were reported in Umatilla County, according to Dr. Bill Messer, an associate professor in the department of microbiology and immunology and the division of infectious diseases at Oregon Health & Science University, Portland.

But experts say that almost certainly is an undercount, as only a small percentage of cases are sequenced to confirm if they are delta. In Umatilla County, only 16 of 116 positive cases over a two-week period in early June were sequenced to confirm if they were delta.

"The short answer is that we, collectively the state, we want to sequence absolutely every specimen we can get our hands on," Messer said. "But there are logistical prob-

lems for that, particularly for the Eastern Oregon counties and rural hospitals."

According to Messer, the state is two weeks behind in its sequencing. That means cases reported since June 15 have not been confirmed as delta or not.

"There is a lag there, and a lot of cases in those lags," Messer said.

Cases have declined across Oregon in recent weeks as the state reached its goal of 70% of residents vaccinated.

Umatilla County — where nearly 33% of residents are vaccinated — has reported some of the highest daily case counts statewide in recent weeks. From July 6 to July 9, Umatilla County reported 67 cases. And since mid-June, the county has reported at least 260 cases, according to county health data.

"We're actually curious to know if this uptick in cases is due to the delta variant," Messer said. "I would be very surprised if it wasn't."

About the delta variant

The delta variant, first identified in India in December 2020, is the most "fit" variant of all coronavirus mutations, experts say. All viruses mutate, and as they do, they become better adapted to latch onto a host. But many experts say vaccinated people don't need to fear the variant.

Early research suggests the delta variant is 50% more transmissible than the alpha variant, a strain out of the United Kingdom that is 50% more transmissible than the original coronavirus strain from Wuhan, China. That means the variant is two to three times as transmissible as the original strain.

PARADE

Continued from Page A1

As of Monday, July 12, there were 26 entries, just four short of the minimum of 30 that Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce, had hoped to have signed up.

"It's a far cry from what we're used to seeing," Cutler said. "But it's enough to make people happy."

Cutler said several community members stepped up to participate in the parade, many of which have never participated before. They wanted the parade to happen, so they took it into their own hands.

The parade will start at 11 a.m. at Baker Middle School as usual. Entries will head east on Broadway to Second, south on Second to Valley, east on Valley to Main, then north on Main to the end at Madison. There will not be an announcer, Cutler said.

VACCINE

Continued from Page A1

It is the second-highest rate, though, among eight counties in Eastern Oregon — Baker, Union, Wallowa, Umatilla, Harney, Malheur, Morrow and Grant.

In that group, only Wallowa County, at 56.6%, has a higher vaccination rate than Baker County.

Staten said she worries that with fewer than half of Baker County residents vaccinated, COVID-19 case rates, which have averaged slightly fewer than two per day since May 1, could rise again, with more contagious variants, most notably the delta variant, beginning to spread.

There have been three cases of the delta variant in Umatilla County, but none in Baker County (see related story above).

"We want our community to be healthy," Staten said.

Oregon's statewide vaccination rate among residents 16 and older is 66.8%.

Among age groups, the statewide vaccination rate

COVID-19 vaccination rates: Baker County and Oregon

AGES 12-15

State: 42.5%
Baker: 13.9%, 101 of 725 residents

AGES 16-19

State: 51.3%
Baker: 23.5%, 151 of 643 residents

AGES 20-29

State: 56.4%
Baker: 28.1%, 365 of 1,301 residents

AGES 30-39

State: 62.8%
Baker: 28.7%, 559 of 1,947 residents

AGES 40-49

State: 66.4%
Baker: 37.8%, 622 of 1,644 residents

AGES 50-59

State: 67.1%
Baker: 40.4%, 924 of 2,289 residents

AGES 60-69

State: 73.6%
Baker: 51.5%, 1,586 of 3,082 residents

AGES 70-79

State: 83.2%
Baker: 64.7%, 1,419 of 2,192 residents

AGES 80 AND OLDER

State: 77.4%
Baker: 67.7%, 749 of 1,106 residents

Source: Oregon Health Authority

ranges from 42.5% for people age 12 to 15 — who have been eligible to be vaccinated only since May — to 83.2% among Oregonians ages 70 to 79.

Baker County's vaccination rates range from 13.9% for ages 12 to 15, to 67.7% for

residents 80 or older.

The county's highest rates, in common with statewide figures, are for people 70 and older, who were eligible starting in January or February.

That's also the age range where the gap between Baker County's vaccination

rate and the statewide rate is smallest.

Among people 80 and older, Baker County's rate of 67.7% is less than 10 percentage points below Oregon's average of 77.4% (see chart on this page).

The difference between Baker County's and Oregon's rates is 18.5 percentage points among people in their 70s.

In all other age groups, the gap between the county and statewide rate ranges from 22.1% (ages 60-69) to 34.1% (ages 30-39).

Staten said she understands that younger residents are less likely to be vaccinated given that people 70 and older are at a much higher risk of dying if they're infected.

In Oregon, 74% of the 2,792 people whose deaths are attributed to COVID-19 were 70 or older, according to the Health Authority.

Of the 15 deaths in Baker County, all but one were older than 70 (the exception was a 59-year-old man).

Baker County has had three COVID-19 deaths since

March 11, and none since May 15.

But Staten also points out that the percentage of cases in the county among people younger than 70 has increased substantially since late March.

In some two-week periods since then, the highest percentage of new cases has been among people in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s.

For the most recent period the Health Department has measured, June 16-30, almost 41% of new cases were among county residents in their 50s.

Another 18% were people in their 40s, and almost 14% were in their 60s or in their 20s.

The average number of vaccinations given in Baker County has plummeted since a series of clinics at Baker High School in February, March and early April.

The county administered 3,034 doses — 26% of its total doses — on just five days during that period.

The county hasn't given more than 96 doses in any day since June 11. The biggest daily number since then

was 39, on June 17, and the county's seven-day running average of doses administered has ranged from 17 to 20 since June 20.

Stephanie Johnson, a registered nurse from Richland, said she has declined to be vaccinated in part because she has "essentially no risk of dying."

Johnson, 33, also said she's leery of taking a vaccine that the federal government has approved only for emergency use, and for which no long-term studies exist about the potential side effects.

"I'm not anti-vax at all," Johnson said. "I personally don't want to be part of a medical study."

She said the COVID-19 vaccines are a "great option" for people who are at a higher risk of becoming severely ill if they're infected.

But Johnson said she doesn't believe government officials should try to "coerce" people into being vaccinated.

"It's a choice," she said. "For me, the risk is higher than the benefit. Medical decisions should be between the patient and provider."



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20% Off all hand tools
July 12th - 16th



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July 15th from 11AM - 2PM.
Hamburgers, Hot Dogs, Sides, Sales!



Chevron DELO
\$12.99/gallon

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select filters





Hydraulic Fluid - \$26.99



Hydraulic Fluid - \$35.99



TORO

Toro 75746, 42" Zero Turn Fab Deck - **\$3,199**
Toro 75742, 42" Zero Turn Stamped Deck - **\$2,899**
Toro 75750, 50" Zero Turn Fab Deck - **\$3,399**



DEF
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