

Delta variant driving COVID-19 surge in Oregon

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

The highly contagious COVID-19 delta variant has caused a steep increase in the number of infections in Oregon — but with different impacts across the state.

“Oregon is open, but the pandemic is not over,” said Oregon Health Director Pat Allen during a press call Thursday, July 22.

COVID-19 infections by the delta variant have doubled in the past week, leading to a new spike in total numbers. OHA reported the number of delta variant cases had risen 25% between Wednesday and Thursday alone.

The delta variant now accounts for over half of all COVID-19 cases in Oregon and is likely to rise, mirroring the national average of 80%.

The statistics were rolled out at OHA’s first high profile press briefing since Gov. Kate Brown ended statewide COVID-19 restrictions June 30.

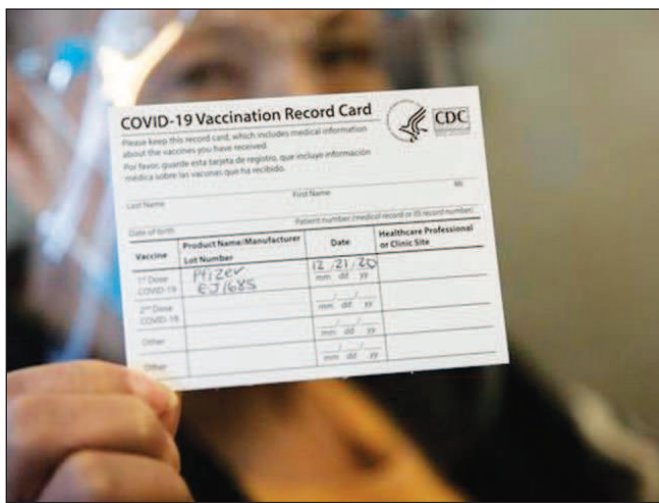
The rise in cases comes as vaccinations in the state have slowed to a trickle. While about 2.4 million residents have received at least one shot of vaccine, Allen said the latest daily number of new inoculations was about 2,000. That’s down from a peak of over 50,000 on some days in early April.

Allen said COVID-19 cases are surging, up tenfold in the past week. The delta variant spreads up to 75% faster than the original COVID-19 virus that first appeared in Oregon in February 2020.

The spread of the virus is not evenly spread throughout Oregon as in earlier spikes, OHA reported.

Allen singled out Umatilla County, which reported 70 new cases but has vaccinated just under 43% of eligible adults.

In contrast, Washington County, near Portland,



Brooke Herbert/Oregonian file

A woman holds up her COVID-19 vaccination card.

“Oregon is open, but the pandemic is not over.”

— Pat Allen, director, Oregon Health Authority

reported 43 new cases and has vaccinated 75% of eligible adults.

“The pandemic is fading for those that are vaccinated — they can resume activities with relative peace of mind,” Allen said.

While significantly more contagious, the delta variant has not been shown to be any more virulent or able to break through vaccines that have been widely available since spring.

While infections and hospitalizations are rising, the number of deaths is expected to be capped well below levels seen last winter when the virus was rampant and no vaccines were available.

Allen said that despite Thursday’s press call to publicize the extent of the delta variant, there were no plans for Brown or OHA to step in and exert control over local decisions.

While OHA was ready to help with additional vaccine and other supports, it is up to county health departments to take a measure of the local impact of the virus and for county commissioners to decide what should be done.

Salem would not issue edicts, but advice.

“Take action now,” Allen said of counties with lagging vaccination rates.

Allen pointed to state statistics showing that 15 out of 36 counties had started vaccinating less than half their adult population. Statewide the number is about 70%.

Dean Sidelinger, the state health officer and chief epidemiologist, said the jump in infections should be a “red alert” for those who have not been vaccinated.

“You are at higher risk now than you were earlier in the pandemic and you are putting the people around you at risk,” Sidelinger said.

Not moving to increase vaccination levels would mean the shadow of the pandemic would continue in communities, schools, workplaces and gatherings.

“The virus looms large,” Sidelinger said.

OHA again said it was hoping for increased persuasion and for local influential individuals and political leaders to take action. There were no plans for new mandates, or to tell employers they should

Baker County reports 17th COVID-19-related death

An 83-year-old woman from Baker County, who died March 25 at a hospital in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, was the county’s 17th COVID-19-related death, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) reported on July 21.

In explaining the nearly four-month delay in reporting the woman’s death, the OHA said that death certificates are sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and when the person dies when not in their home state the process can take longer to be reported to that state.

“Her passing was reported to us almost four months after the fact, and our condolences are certainly belated, but I want to take this opportunity to let her loved ones know I’m deeply sorry and they are in our thoughts,” Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett said in a press release.

The woman tested positive on March 17. Doctors have not determined whether she had underlying medical conditions, according to OHA.

The county’s 16th COVID-19-related death was a 59-year-old man who died on July 13, six days after testing positive. He had underlying medical conditions, according to OHA.

His death was the first related to COVID-19 reported in Baker County since May 15.

The county’s infection rate has not risen as fast as the statewide average over the past few weeks. Baker County reported 17 cases from July 1-15. The county’s test positivity rate for the two-week period ending July 17 was 2.1%, compared to a statewide average of 3.8%.

The county’s vaccination rate, by contrast, falls well short of the statewide average. As of July 22, 46% of county residents 18 and older had been vaccinated. The Oregon average is 68.2%. Baker County’s rate is lower than all but eight of Oregon’s 35 other counties, just behind Union County (46.9%) but ahead of several other counties in the region, including Grant (42.4%), Umatilla (42.7%), Malheur (37.5%), Harney (43.0%), Morrow (45.0%). Wallowa County has the highest vaccination rate among Eastern Oregon counties, at 57.5%.

— Jayson Jacoby

require vaccinations.

Citing the “highly political” nature of the COVID-19 debate, Allen said efforts to increase vaccinations had to come from trusted local sources, including civic and faith leaders, as well as political officeholders.

Asked directly if the state would step in to curb or cancel the Pendleton Round-

Up in September if Umatilla County’s infection rates stayed at current levels, Allen demurred.

“Two or three months in the future are an eternity” in the pandemic, he said.

While transferring daily control of the pandemic response to counties, Brown has not lifted the state emergency order that has been in

place since March 2020 and renewed several times.

Allen said that getting people to realize the gravity of the pandemic and to make their own choice to get vaccinated was going to work best.

“I don’t care what you think, you have to get vaccinated” was a message that wouldn’t help anyone.

Asked if any Republican leaders in the state had stepped up to publicly push for vaccination, Allen said he had had conversations with many leaders of all political views and it was up to them to decide their public role.

“Let them speak for themselves,” he said, adding, “Who are the right messengers, what is the right message?”

Up until June 30, the state had decided the risk level for infection in each county and what restrictions should be in place. Though Brown officially disconnected the risk analysis from state response, the statistics are still reported each Monday.

Statewide, the percentage of positive cases averaged 3.8% through the two-week period ending July 17. But in Umatilla County, the percentage was 12.4% and Morrow County was 14.4%.

Baker County’s percentage was 2.1%.

In contrast, Multnomah County — which includes Portland — was 2%. Lane County — including Eugene — was 2.9%. And Deschutes County — including Bend — was 3.4%. But OHA reported even these small percentages were increases over the prior two-week periods going back to June 20.

OHA on Wednesday posted an update showing the number of confirmed cases of the COVID-19 delta variant had more than doubled, from 43 to 90, between reports on July 10 and July 17.



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