

COVID Update December 4, 2020

Things are looking pretty grim.

Cases in SC hit 1,612 on Tuesday, with 35 deaths, and the positivity rate on tests is 21.6%. Further increases are expected following Thanksgiving Day gatherings.

The CDC is advising against all but essential travel and is discouraging family gatherings for Christmas in the face of exponentially rising cases, hospitalizations and deaths. If travel is necessary, it recommends a COVID test one to three days before travel and another three to five days after travel, plus reducing nonessential activities for seven days after travel. Those who do not get tested should reduce nonessential activities for 10 days after travel, the agency said.

Nationally, Tuesday was the deadliest day for COVID since the previous record set April 15, with 2,597 deaths. November had twice as many new cases as were seen during the previous peak in April, but half the deaths, due to better care of those who become severely ill.

In SC, new cases are being driven mostly by smaller group gatherings, and when index cases are assessed, 53% of transmissions are from children under age 12, and 38% are from children age 13-17.

In positive news, two vaccines have shown excellent efficacy and emergency use authorizations from the FDA are pending. The CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices met Tuesday to vote on recommendations for prioritization in the distribution of the vaccine. The first round of vaccine will be given to front line health care workers, essential personnel, and long-term care residents and staff. The two companies that developed the first approved vaccines are ramping up production and distribution. Moderna said recently it will have 20 million doses available in the U.S. by the end of this calendar year and another 500 million to 1 billion next year. Pfizer has said it will have as many as 50 million doses of its vaccine manufactured by the end of this year, and another 1.3 billion next year.

The CDC on Wednesday revised its quarantine guidelines for COVID exposure down from the previously recommended 14 days. The new guidelines say that individuals who have close contact with an infected person can end their quarantine after seven days if they receive a negative test, or after 10 days without a test.

Governor McMaster is continuing to emphasize testing and SC DHEC has expanded testing sites for the rapid test. However, the rapid test has a 30% false negative rate, meaning almost a third of the time a person with a negative test actually has COVID. This means it can be used to rule IN COVID, but COVID should not be considered ruled OUT unless a confirmatory nasopharyngeal PCR test can be done. So there is concern among public health professionals that a false sense of security, and dangerous loosening of preventive measures, will result from this widespread 'test before turkey' campaign. Rapid testing is meant to screen a large population for asymptomatic cases, NOT rule out COVID in close contacts or symptomatic individuals.