

COVID Update May 7, 2021

Most counties in SC including Greenville, Anderson, Oconee, and Spartanburg counties remain in the 'moderate' (51-200 cases per 100k population) two-week cumulative case range. As Jane Kelly, MD, assistant epidemiologist with SC DHEC keeps reminding us, we should be glad cases have waned but need to remember that this is the case level (22,000 new cases per day nationally) we had back in October when we were trying to stave off the winter surge, unsuccessfully, so this is no time to let our guard down.

While numbers of tests performed in the state has declined, the percent positive is also down, to 4.7%, which is excellent news.

Although many states are relaxing mask mandates, the TSA announced that masks will remain mandatory for airplanes, airports, trains, commuter rail systems and other modes of transportation through Sept. 13, an extension of the Feb. 1 mandate that was due to expire May 11.

SC is now at 42% of the population having received one vaccination, and 32% fully vaccinated, with older adults the leading age group by a large margin. Nationally, 44% of the adult population has received one vaccination, and 31% are fully vaccinated, according to the CDC. While full 'herd immunity', causing a complete halt of the pandemic, may be difficult to attain due to persistent vaccine hesitance, there is hope that we can reach a 'tipping point' where enough of the population is immune that at least severe outbreaks can be prevented.

Pfizer has applied for Emergency Use Authorization for its vaccine in 12 to 15 year-olds, which will probably be approved by the FDA next week. Many schools are encouraging teens to get vaccinated before prom.

COVID spread in the state is now being fed by rising cases in teens and young adults (ages 15 to 34), many of whom do not expect to become severely ill if they do contract COVID and therefore feel no urgency to be vaccinated.

Although state health experts continue to strongly recommend the wearing of masks, Gov. McMaster on Monday was reported to have called masks in schools 'the height of ridiculousity.' Numerous SC DHEC health and epidemiology directors immediately went on record to disagree with that statement.

Large outbreaks continue to be problematic, including one traced to a large indoor event at the Fraternal Order of Eagles Hall in a small town (Republic, pop.1,073) in Washington, where 10% of the population was infected.

Testing for SARS CoV-2 variants in the US has so far not shown any that are resistant to our currently available vaccines. Unfortunately, the US is woefully under-testing for variants (less than 1% of COVID isolates are tested here, compared with a third of all cases in the U.K.)

Premature relaxing of precautions, and a new, vaccine resistant variant, could be disastrous in the U.S. India is a sad example of what could happen, where hospitals are, again, overwhelmed and daily case numbers continue to climb to daily record-breaking numbers. Over 400,000 new cases were documented in India's 1.4 billion population this past weekend, and that number may actually be only a tenth of the actual infection rate.