

COVID Update March 2, 2022

IN SC: SC DHEC continues to report rapidly declining daily cases in SC. The two-week cumulative cases by DHEC's report for Greenville County is also now down, at 68/100k population (moderate level). The SC DHEC website, now using new metrics but NOT the CDC's new metrics (see below) shows most counties still at 'high' but numerous counties at the 'substantial' and 'moderate' risk level, with Greenville County at 'substantial', based on Feb 21 to Feb 27 data. The new DHEC reporting is based on new cases per 100k population over 7 days, and percent positivity of tests, with 'high' being greater than 100 cases and test positivity greater than 10%; 'substantial' being 50-99 cases and 8-9.99% test positivity; 'moderate' being 10-49 cases and 5-7.99% test positivity' and 'low' less than 10 cases and test positivity less than 4.99%. The CDC website itself currently shows Greenville County at 'high' risk level, but it is varying between 'high' and substantial day to day. The CDC recommends masks indoors for everyone at the high level.

New CDC mask guidance: On Friday Feb. 25 the CDC announced new recommendations for the wearing of masks, which results in the recommendation that most Americans can now forgo mask wearing indoors. In areas with "high" levels, the CDC advises wearing a mask in all public indoor settings, including schools. In areas with "medium" (moderate or substantial risk) levels, the CDC advises talking with your doctor about wearing a mask if you're at increased risk for Covid-19. In areas with "low" Covid-19 community levels, no mask wearing is recommended in general. However, masks should always be worn if one tests positive for COVID, has COVID symptoms, or was recently exposed to COVID.

New CDC Metrics: Counties with fewer than 200 new Covid-19 cases per 100,000 people in the past week are considered to have "low" Covid-19 community levels if they have fewer than 10 new Covid-19 hospital admissions per 100,000 or less than 10% of staffed hospital beds occupied by Covid-19 patients on average in the past week. Levels are "medium" if counties have 10 to nearly 20 new Covid-19 hospital admissions per 100,000 or between 10% and 14.9% of staffed hospital beds occupied by Covid-19 patients on average in the past week. Levels are considered "high" if counties have 20 or more new Covid-19 hospital admissions per 100,000 or at least 15% of staffed hospital beds occupied by Covid-19 patients on average in the past week. Levels are also considered high if there are more than 200 new COVID cases per 100k population in the past week.

The update to CDC guidance comes at a time when daily Covid-19 cases in the United States have fallen to a tenth of what they were at their peak last month, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The 90% drop – from an average of more than 802,000 cases per day on January 15 to less than 75,000 currently – happened over the course of about six weeks.

County levels of risk can be searched online at this link: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html>

In the US: 950,000 people have now died of COVID, and there are still 1,600 daily deaths. Daily deaths actually rose over the past seven days, which is a worrisome trend as it may mean the decline in health department and laboratory reported PCR testing means the current low case numbers represent under reporting, not a true decline.

Vaccine guidance change – The CDC announced Tuesday Feb 22 that for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, in some populations, the optimal timing between the first and second dose may be 8 weeks instead of 3 or 4. In young men ages 12-39, that interval produced a better immune response and decreased the risk of the very rare myocarditis in that age group. The three- or four-week interval is still recommended for people who are moderately or severely immunocompromised, adults 65 and older "and others who need rapid protection due to increased concern about community transmission or risk of severe disease." Children under 11 are not affected by the change

Are the new masking rules safe or wise? Numerous epidemiologists and infectious disease experts have expressed concern about the relaxing of mask guidelines in light of data from Denmark, which on Feb. 1 removed ALL their stringent COVID protections (including mandatory mask use in public and documentation of vaccination status before entry to many venues). The month of February then saw the worst surge in cases, hospitalizations, and deaths yet seen in that country, despite a highly vaccinated (over 82% fully vaccinated) population with fewer risk factors for severe disease than we have in the U.S. The opinion of many experts is that the relaxing of mask guidelines at the same time as testing is being scaled back markedly in the U.S. risks a similar surge here.

Addendum March 4: The CDC website Friday March 4 showed Greenville County at 'low' risk level for the first time