

Community Column

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COVID Topics: Late Summer Guidance

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As we continue to learn more about COVID-19, its variants, and vaccine effectiveness, more and more information is being shared in the media, in discussions with our friends and family, at our workplaces, at our school boards. It seems that everywhere we turn, conversations eventually turn to the pandemic. The sheer number of updates and adjustments in our approaches can understandably be a source of confusion.

Here are some of the items I receive the most questions about, with an update of where the guidance stands:

Third doses: Third doses are only approved for the ~3% of the population who have moderate or severe immunity-compromising conditions, such as HIV or cancer treatment. This is because people who are immunocompromised and who are considered “fully vaccinated” may have lower antibody levels compared to people who are not immunocompromised. Only people who are immunocompromised and have received their first two doses of the mRNA vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) are eligible to receive a third dose of one of those vaccines.

“Booster” shots: Booster shots (for people who are fully vaccinated and not immunocompromised) have not been approved at this time. Once they are approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), and the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), the rollout will take place over several months, likely beginning no sooner than late September. We are working with our vaccine partners to be able to provide booster shots once they are approved.

Going back to school safely: Ensuring that we can have in-person learning for our school-age children requires that we take precautions to protect everyone in school settings. In addition to getting vaccinated for those who are eligible and to wearing masks, teachers, staff, children, and their families should avoid risky behaviors and large gatherings, especially large indoor gatherings, to decrease the risk of getting, and spreading the disease. We all need to do our part to help children stay in school and to protect kids under the age of 12 who are not eligible to be vaccinated.

Getting tested: Regardless of whether you are vaccinated or not, you should get tested if you have signs or symptoms of COVID-19. In addition, people who are exposed to COVID-19, including people who are fully vaccinated, should be tested 3-5 days following a known exposure to someone with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, even if they don't have symptoms. The nasal swab PCR test is the most accurate test available and can take 48-72 hours to receive results. Self-collection (“at-home” or “rapid”) tests are available over-the-counter in stores and pharmacies. Follow the instructions exactly to obtain the most accurate results, and be sure to contact your physician if your results are positive.

With all of the information available, it can be hard to keep up with the latest information and it can be hard to discern what is true. Please visit a reputable website, such as the Virginia Department of Health or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for the most recent information about COVID. What we do know is that vaccines are the most important tool to

protect you and the people you love, that masks work, and that avoiding crowds especially indoors can decrease the risk of disease.