

BJC HealthCare, IDPH Step Up Mitigation Efforts With COVID Case Uptick

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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CHICAGO - The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) and BJC HealthCare are stepping up mitigation efforts to minimize the spread of respiratory viruses.

IDPH reports 51 counties, or half the counties in Illinois, are now at a medium or high level for COVID-19 hospitalizations.

IDPH has also issued a health alert today to hospitals, long-term care facilities, and local health departments outlining various mitigation measures such as the use of masking and screening, especially in areas where more vulnerable patients are treated.

BJC HealthCare announced it will reinstate its mask mandate for staff starting Wednesday, Dec. 13, 2023. The mandate going into effect includes about 30,000 employees across its facilities on both sides of the Mississippi River, including Alton Memorial Hospital.

Hillary Babcock, Infectious Disease Physician and Chief Quality Officer with BJC HealthCare, said the action is in response to an uptick in the number of new COVID cases in the St. Louis Metro area, as well as other respiratory ailments like RSV and Influenza.

Dr. Babcock emphasized the best way to keep your family safe during the holidays, especially visiting immunocompromised individuals is to "wear masks if you're in crowded places."

BJC HealthCare issued this statement about the mask mandate at the hospitals: "BJC HealthCare regularly monitors the community infection rate and may choose to institute temporary enhanced masking requirements for staff when rates are particularly high. To control the spread of infection during the current peak respiratory virus season, starting Wednesday, December 13, 2023, BJC employees will be required to wear masks in patient care settings.

"This does not impact guidelines for patients and visitors, although we do encourage masking and masks are available at our facility entrances. We will continue to evaluate infection rates and loosen these requirements when appropriate. In the meantime, please stay home when you're sick, mask in public settings if you or someone you live with is high-risk, and get vaccinated."

IDPH said it supports CDC's recommendation of facility-wide masking at healthcare facilities that are in counties rated at high level for COVID-19 hospitalizations or per facility discretion in areas where data shows elevated transmission of other respiratory viruses such as flu and RSV, even if COVID-19 hospitalization levels are not high in those areas.

"With the alarming rise in respiratory viruses we are seeing across the state and the country, IDPH is recommending healthcare facilities take precautions to reduce the spread of these viruses and protect their patients, staffs, and visitors," said IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra. "We are most concerned with healthcare facilities in counties with elevated respiratory virus transmission and hospitalization levels and

recommend masking in patient care areas, especially in emergency departments and areas caring for patients who are immunocompromised.”

Ahead of the holidays, IDPH is advising Illinoisans to get fully protected with all of the vaccinations they are eligible for, including COVID-19, flu and RSV.

The [St. Louis County Health Department](#) reported almost double the number of new COVID cases diagnosed in just a month. There was an average of about 80 cases in the county diagnosed on November 5, 2023. That number jumped to close to 170 diagnosed cases in one day on December 6, 2023.