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BULLETIN:

The CDC, Covid-19, and Masks

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by Diana Quinn

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revised its mask guidance, advising vaccinated people in areas of the country with **substantial** and **high** numbers of Covid-19 infections to resume wearing masks in indoor public places. The CDC is also recommending that children and teens from kindergarten through high school – as well as teachers, visitors, and staff – wear masks in schools, regardless of vaccination status.

CDC director Rochelle Walensky, MD, MPH, said in a teleconference with reporters that the situation in the country has changed since the CDC made school recommendations on July 9, 2021, “There was less variant in the country and fewer cases, and we were hopeful that we would have more people vaccinated [by now], especially 12-17 year olds. With only 40% of kids between 12 and 17 vaccinated, we need to make sure kids can safely get back to full in-person learning in the fall, so we are recommending that everyone [in schools] wear masks right now.”

Dr. Walensky also said that the new guidance is meant to protect children younger than age 12, who can’t be vaccinated, and immunosuppressed people, who may be at risk even if fully vaccinated, “I have seen new scientific data from recent outbreak investigations showing that the Delta variant behaves uniquely differently from past strains of the virus...In rare occasions, some vaccinated people infected with the Delta variant after vaccination may be contagious and spread the virus to others...In the case, for example, of vaccinated individuals who might be going to visit an immunocompromised family member, we wanted to make sure they take the precautions necessary to not have the virus...This new science is worrisome and unfortunately warrants an update to our recommendations.”

Dr. Walensky said that the CDC is conducting outbreak investigations in areas with clusters of the virus, “We examined the rarer breakthrough infections and looked at the amount of virus in those people, and it is similar to the amount of virus in unvaccinated people...But I want to reiterate that the vast majority of the transmission is occurring in unvaccinated people and through unvaccinated people. This is different from May. With the Delta variant, we are seeing now that it is possible to have a breakthrough infection.”

Dr. Walensky also emphasized that unvaccinated people should get vaccinated, saying, “The vast majority of transmission and severe disease, hospitalization, and death is almost exclusively happening among unvaccinated people...With the Delta variant, vaccinating more Americans now is more urgent than ever. The highest spread of cases and severe outcomes is happening in places with low vaccination rates and among unvaccinated people...The associated illness, suffering, and death could have been avoided with higher vaccination coverage in this country.”

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The CDC change in mask advice was based on science, Dr. Walensky insisted, saying, “This pandemic continues to pose a serious threat to the health of all Americans...Our guidance will follow the science...Today we have new science related to the Delta variant that requires us to update the guidance regarding what you can do when you are fully vaccinated...It is [trying] to outsmart us and to be an opportunist in areas where we have not shown a fortified response against it.”

How is the Delta variant unique? Dr. Walensky said, “There is the rare occasion in which some vaccinated people infected with the Delta variant after vaccination may be contagious and spread the virus to others. This new science is worrisome.”

Asked why mask guidelines are being changed to protect people who refuse to get vaccinated, Dr. Walensky said, “There are some people who are not able to be fully vaccinated, like young children and some people unable to get full protection, like immunocompromised people...The largest concern we in public health and science are worried about is the potential mutation of a very transmissible virus that has the potential to evade our vaccines in terms of how it protects us from severe disease...The big concern is that the next variant may emerge.”

Dr. Walensky evaded a question on when the CDC will release data from its outbreak investigations. She did say that vaccinated people who test positive for Covid-19 are carrying a very similar viral load to unvaccinated people who test positive.

Asked about the definitions of substantial and high rates of transmission in communities, Dr. Walensky said that the CDC tracks Covid-19 activity county by county. Substantial is 50-100 cases per 100,000 people over a seven-day period, and high is more than 100 cases. She added, “We have places that are reporting more than 300 cases per 100,000 over a seven-day period.” Here is a CDC webpage which evaluates transmission rates by county: <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view>

Asked if the CDC is thinking about recommending vaccination mandates for communities like the federal workforce or the military, Dr. Walensky said, “That is not anything that the CDC has jurisdiction over. We are the technical advisor to the government as it makes these decisions, and we are recommending that communities look at their community levels and really look at what would motivate their communities to help get people vaccinated. If businesses believe there should be a mandate, we would encourage them to do so...Not all communities are going to be responsive to a mandate in the same way.”

Dr. Walensky said that the decision to change the guidelines “is not a decision that we at CDC have made lightly. This weighs heavily on me. I know that 18 months through this pandemic people are tired, and they are frustrated. We have many health challenges in this country; we have a lot of continued sickness and death in this country...Public health experts, scientific experts, and medical experts when shown these data, universally said that it required action. I saw it and felt that when I saw the data myself.”

