

August 16, 2021

To our patients,

These are indeed turbulent times. As scientific data has emerged during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen the CDC issue guidelines saying no masks are needed, everyone needs to wear a mask, masks need to be worn inside, only unvaccinated people need to wear masks and recently that all of us should be wearing masks indoors.

As more data emerges, guidelines change. While the appearance is one of confusion and indecisiveness, those familiar with the scientific process know that this is exactly how science advances. It usually happens behind closed laboratory doors but the recent move towards transparency has exposed this tortuous and often frustrating process to the light of day.

The Virus:

The original virus has mutated. Originally, named for locations (UK, South African, etc.) the labeling of strains has been changed to the Greek alphabet to reduce hate-related acts and opinions. We know that the only way the virus can mutate is through replication. Hence, the idea of herd immunity. If the virus can't spread, it can't replicate, mutate and continue to be a threat. As a result of several variables including world-wide access to vaccine, political, religious and personal beliefs, we have failed to reach herd immunity and the mutations continue.

The current Delta strain is highly contagious, much more than the original virus. It doesn't seem to be any more virulent or deadly but it seems to affect a younger population and the more seriously ill are largely amongst the unvaccinated. There are other strains being identified including an Epsilon strain that may not be covered by the current vaccines.

With the original outbreak, Bellevue Medical Partners did not see a significant number of infections in our clinic population, and we had no patients die from Covid. While we have been fortunate to still have none of our patients succumb to the virus, we have seen an alarming increase in cases of Covid over the past few weeks in both vaccinated and unvaccinated people. Most infections in those vaccinated have been in people whose immune system is compromised, either through underlying illness or through immune-suppressing medication.

The Vaccines:

Coupled with masking and social distancing, vaccination remains our best hope of stopping further mutation of the virus. There is very good data showing that <5% of hospitalizations and deaths from Covid are in vaccinated patients. However, it is not entirely accurate to say that this is a pandemic of the unvaccinated.

Vaccinated people can contract, carry, transmit and become ill from the virus. However, the occurrence of Covid infection in a vaccinated person does not mean that the vaccine doesn't work. It is safe to say that a vaccinated person, with the current strains identified, will not die

from the virus. Nor will they likely need ICU care and in general should have a milder course. The same cannot be said for unvaccinated people who may become infected through contact

with a vaccinated person transmitting Covid. Furthermore, we cannot promise that vaccinated people will be protected from Epsilon or other strains that emerge in the future.

Let us be perfectly clear on one thing: **the benefits of the vaccine very clearly outweigh the risks...and it's not even close!**

The risk of serious adverse effect and death from vaccination is about 1:1,000,000. The number of deaths in that same population of 1 million if they are unvaccinated is 10,000. That's only deaths; not included are those severely infected who don't die but may be susceptible to dementia, heart failure, renal failure, COPD or other organ damage in the coming years from the inflammation caused by the virus.

We anticipate that a booster dose may be recommended in the future. Early data out of Israel implies that this may be needed. There are many variables here as well. Will it be the same dose? Does it need to be the same manufacturer (J&J, Moderna or Pfizer)? Does everyone need it? We will certainly be monitoring the data and guidelines and will help inform you as recommendations become available.

Bellevue Medical Partners Policy:

Recently, some have been resistant to wearing a mask when coming into the office. The sense is that once vaccinated they no longer pose a risk to others and should be free of having to wear a mask. We hope that the above information explains why it is important to still take these precautions.

Those who choose to remain unvaccinated put themselves at risk. Many of our patients do not have the luxury of that choice. Some are immunocompromised due to chronic illness such as diabetes, congestive heart or renal failure, cancer and autoimmune conditions. Some are on medications that suppress the immune system such as prednisone, chemotherapies and biologics. Others just haven't developed immunity to the vaccine. Despite taking the vaccine, they remain at risk. There is also the population of children <12 years of age who can't be vaccinated. Given what we know about transmission of the virus, even in those who are vaccinated, it is incumbent upon us to try to protect these groups as well as those who choose not to be vaccinated.

For these reasons, it is our policy that **anyone coming into the clinic wears a mask!** We will also continue to screen people by phone and refer those with symptoms needing Covid testing to the King County testing sites. These are well-run sites that often get results back to you in 24 hours. We continue to offer phone appointments and telehealth visits when appropriate for those who find it more convenient and for those who choose to not wear a mask.

We long for the day when this isn't necessary and we hope that through compliance, we can all safely reach that day.

Sincerely,

Drs. Mills and Kaner