BERRIEN COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT
better health. stronger communities.

School & Community Based COVID-19 Response
Frequently Asked Questions

This list of frequently asked questions is not exhaustive, but focuses on reoccurring questions that we have received from Berrien County residents, parents, and partners. The Berrien County Health Department (BCHD) will work to update this list as new questions are identified and as we continue to progress through this COVID-19 pandemic response period.

Guidance & Recommendations Issued by BCHD

What does BCHD use to base its guidance & recommendations?

The BCHD bases actions on five key areas when making decisions and setting guidance for response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those include:

- Local Community Transmission. Transmission is measured using indicators established by the CDC which includes cumulative cases of COVID-19 over a 7 day period and the percent of positive NAAT's over a 7 day period.
- Hospital System Capacity. BCHD works with health system partners to ensure that a standard of care can be maintained and residents are able to seek and receive needed healthcare. We monitor COVID-19 cases hospitalized, but also overall system ability to operate which is most critical to overall community health.
- Immunization Rates. BCHD monitors local – County-wide to census tracts – vaccination rates and works to promote increased access and uptake of vaccination for all eligible county residents.
- Case Investigation & Contact Tracing. BCHD monitors the ability for providing meaningful follow-up to positive cases and close contacts to ensure chain of transmission is broken and community spread is not sustained.
- Populations at Risk. BCHD monitors impact to vulnerable populations, ensuring that infection and illness is not unduly impacting one population of the County. Additionally, it is important to monitor that new groups have not become increasingly susceptible to severe illness, hospitalization and/or death from COVID-19.

Additionally, as a local health department, the BCHD works to overlay Federal (CDC) and State (MDHHS) guidance with local context to benefit and sustain health and wellness for Berrien County residents.

How is guidance issued to schools (on a localized basis or county-wide basis)?

The BCHD issued guidance and recommendations on a County-wide basis to educational partners. However, in addition to this overarching guidance, the BCHD provides individualized technical assistance and recommendations for additional prevention and mitigation levels to school districts, buildings, and classrooms based on localized impacts of disease transmission and school linked illness and risk.

Why are there specific guidance and recommendations made for schools?

Schools and educational institutions are congregate settings that pull together a diversity of community members and stakeholders. They have internal community made up of varying ages and vulnerabilities. We know that school health is important to overall community health. Additionally, at this time with the presence of the Delta variant we are still learning about its impacts to youth and need time to ensure that it is not more severe for youth than past strains. Finally, vaccination rates are still low for those under 19 (34% in Berrien as of 8/26/21) and children under the age of 12 are not yet eligible for vaccination.

We have vaccine available to our community, so why are prevention measures needed at all this school year?

At this time, vaccination rates are still low for those under 19 (34% in Berrien as of 8/26/21) and children under the age of 12 are not yet eligible for vaccination. Additionally, we have had a new variant of concern – Delta – identified this summer which is proving to be more than 2x more transmissible than the original strain. With increasing cases and unknowns surrounding the Delta variant, prevention measures ensure our youth can have in-person school for the 2021-2022 year.

Youth & School Community Health

How is local public health accounting for mental health impacts of youth in decisions made and guidance provided to school-based partners?

The BCHD has and continues to prioritize in-person learning and school operations in all of its pandemic response planning. The social and emotional development that is linked to in-person school is incredibly important to overall community health and the wellness of our youngest residents. The BCHD works to make recommendations and guidance that sustains in-person learning and limits periods of social isolation that we know has had significant impact on the health and wellness of our youth.

How does transmission amongst youth, and specifically schools, impact surrounding communities? Why does this matter?

Transmission of COVID-19 within schools is usually the same as or lower than surrounding community when there are layered prevention and mitigation strategies in place. Schools as a congregate setting with a diverse staff and student population can also provide a platform for community transmission.

Why is masking recommended as a layer of prevention against COVID-19 for everyone again?

The BCHD bases its recommendations on CDC guidance and the latest scientific data, including evidence on the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines. In May 2021, before the fast-spreading Delta variant became the dominant strain in the U.S., the CDC updated its recommendations for fully vaccinated individuals based on evidence that the COVID-19 vaccines are extremely effective in protecting fully vaccinated people from catching and spreading the virus. (continued on next page)

Why is masking recommended as a layer of prevention against COVID-19 for everyone again? (Continued)

The CDC's updated masking guidance (July 27, 2021) advised that vaccinated and unvaccinated people communities with substantial or high transmission rates should wear a mask in indoor, public settings. This new guidance is based on data showing that in rare instances, vaccinated people can catch and spread the virus.

While vaccinated individuals have excellent protection from COVID-19, the Delta variant is highly contagious compared with previous strains and people who are vaccinated can spread the virus to unvaccinated individuals.

With local transmission being in the substantial to high range, with the presence of the Delta variant and with overall vaccination rates reaching just above 55%, masking is a recommended mitigation strategy that keeps school, business, and social aspects of our community open and moving forward while adding in a much needed layer of protection from continued transmission.

Are masks effective?

Yes. One of the easiest and most effective ways of limiting the spread of COVID-19 is wearing a mask when in public indoor settings.

Masks are primarily intended to reduce the emission of virus-laden droplets ("source control"),which is especially relevant for asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic infected wearers who feel well and may be unaware of their infectiousness to others, and who are estimated to account for more than 50%of transmissions. Masks also help reduce inhalation of these droplets by the wearer ("filtration for wearer protection").

The community benefit of masking is due to the combination of these effects when used universally; individual prevention benefit increases with increasing numbers of people using masks consistently and correctly.

Read UM Health blog: "4 Mask Myths that Put You at Risk"

Why is there not more emphasis placed on therapeutic drugs for treatment of COVID-19 infections?

The role of local public health is to focus on prevention of COVID-19; we do work closely with our healthcare partners and all individuals who test positive for COVID-19 are encouraged by BCHD case investigators to seek care from their primary care physicians.

Isolation, Quarantine, & Testing for COVID-19

Why is contact tracing important?

Contact tracing helps to control the spread of the virus by quickly identifying and informing people who may have been exposed to an infected person. This helps to limit further transmission to others and decrease the spread of COVID-19 in our community.

What is the purpose of isolation?

Isolation keeps someone who is infected with the COVID-19 virus away from others, when possible even from others in their own home. This is inclusive of someone who has symptoms of COVID-19 and someone who may not have symptoms (asymptomatic), but have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus.

Learn more about isolation here.

What is the purpose of quarantine?

Quarantine keeps someone who may have been exposed to the virus away from others and ensures that if they do contract COVID-19 they are not continuing the chain of transmission to others.

Learn more about quarantine here.

What tests are available for diagnostic testing?

Robust testing is critical to identifying and predicting outbreaks, conducting effective contact tracing, and preventing the spread of COVID-19. Anyone with signs or symptoms of COVID-19 should get tested, regardless of vaccination status or prior infection.

Learn more about testing locations in Berrien County here.

Diagnostic tests can show if you have an active COVID-19 infection and need to take steps to quarantine or isolate yourself from others. Molecular and antigen tests are types of diagnostic tests than can detect if you have an active COVID-19 infection. Samples for diagnostic tests are typically collected with a nasal or throat swab, or saliva collected by spitting into a tube.

PCR (Molecular Test)

Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing is considered the "gold standard" in SARS-CoV-2 detection. This test actually detects RNA (or genetic material) that is specific to the virus and can detect the virus within days of infection, even those who have no symptoms.

Rapid Antigen

Rapid antigen tests are relatively inexpensive and, with proper interpretation, can be used to quickly confirm a suspected case of COVID-19 in a clinical setting. However, these tests are less sensitive than the recommended RT-PCR tests and more likely to return a false negative. Because they are less sensitive, rapid tests perform best when the person is tested in the early stages of infection, when viral load is generally highest. There is limited evidence to confirm the efficacy of rapid antigen tests to detect or exclude COVID-19 in asymptomatic people accurately or determine whether a previously confirmed case is still infectious.

In short, rapid tests are useful for confirming infection in someone with symptoms. They are less reliable in screening of people who are asymptomatic.

What is an antibody test?

Antibody tests look for the presence of antibodies in your immune system produced in response to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Antibody tests should not be used to diagnose an active COVID-19 infection. Antibodies can take several days or weeks to develop after you have an infection and may stay in your blood for several weeks or more after recovery. Samples for antibody tests are typically blood from a finger stick, or blood drawn by your doctor or other medical personnel.

COVID-19 Vaccination

What does Emergency Use Authorization mean? Is it the same as "experimental"?

Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) allows the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to authorize use of yet to be approved drugs, or unapproved uses of approved drugs, for life-threatening conditions when there are no other adequate, approved, and available options and other conditions are met.

In the case of COVID-19, the FDA has issued Emergency Use Authorizations for the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson COVID vaccines.

In an emergency, like a pandemic, it may not be possible to have all the evidence that the FDA would usually have before fully approving a vaccine or drug. If there's evidence that strongly suggests that patients have benefited from a treatment, the agency can issue an EUA to make it available. For the COVID-19 vaccines, FDA required two months of safety and efficacy data before the EUA was granted.

Before receiving EUA, the COVID vaccines were rigorously tested and reviewed, and they continue to be closely monitored. All three vaccines underwent clinical trials with tens of thousands of people, and the FDA evaluated comprehensive data on their safety and effectiveness. All three showed excellent safety and effectiveness profiles.

The FDA granted the Pfizer vaccine full approval of its COVID vaccine in August 2021 for individuals 16 years and older, which involved reviewing additional data on the safety and efficacy of the vaccine. The vaccine also continues to be available under emergency use authorization (EUA), including for individuals 12 through 15 years of age and for the administration of a third dose in certain immunocompromised individuals.

If many of our senior (65+) community members are vaccinated, why is it still a priority to acknowledge vulnerable individuals as part of decision making and recommendations?

Throughout the pandemic period, we have continued to learn more about COVID-19 and how it impacts our populations. The most severe impacts and death have been primarily in our oldest and most frail community members so having high rates for vaccination here is incredibly important to our ongoing response in Berrien County. However, they are not the only group vulnerable to COVID-19. (continued on the next page)

If many of our senior (65+) community members are vaccinated, why is it still a priority to acknowledge vulnerable individuals as part of decision making and recommendations? (Continued from previous page)

Long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put various groups of people at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19, including many racial and ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities. Additionally, we have also seen that vulnerable populations have included individuals with underlying health conditions have increased risk and vulnerability.

We are still learning about COVID-19, especially the Delta variant, and have to monitor these impacts on an ongoing basis, specifically on children.

Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe for my kid(s)?

Yes. The FDA and CDC have carefully reviewed the clinical trials for Pfizer's COVID vaccine, and it has been proven to be safe and effective for children 12 and older. Moderna has also applied for authorization for its vaccine for 12- to 15-year-olds, and that data is currently under review. Clinical trials are also underway regarding the potential use of these vaccines for children under 12.

Vaccines are being closely monitored to ensure the safety of the vaccines for all eligible age groups.

If I had COVID-19 in the past should I still be vaccinated?

Yes, you should be vaccinated regardless of whether you already had COVID-19 because:

- Research has not yet shown how long you are protected from getting COVID-19 again after you recover from COVID-19.
- Vaccination helps protect you even if you've already had COVID-19.
- Evidence is emerging that people get better protection by being fully vaccinated compared with having had COVID-19. One study showed that unvaccinated people who already had COVID-19 are more than 2 times as likely than fully vaccinated people to get COVID-19 again.

Evidence is emerging that people get better protection by being fully vaccinated compared with having had COVID-19. One study showed that unvaccinated people who already had COVID-19 are more than 2 times as likely than fully vaccinated people to get COVID-19 again.

Community Surveillance & Data Sources

What does percent positivity mean, and what does it tell us?

The percent positivity is the percentage of all molecular diagnostic coronavirus tests performed that are actually positive, or: (positive tests)/(total tests) x 100%. The percent positivity (sometimes called the "percent positive rate" or "positivity rate") helps public health officials answer questions such as:

- What is the current level of SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus) transmission in the community?
- Are we doing enough testing for the amount of people who are getting infected? (continued on the next page)

What does percent positivity mean, and what does it tell us? (Continued from previous page)

The percent positive will be high if the number of positive tests is too high, or if the number of total tests is too low. A higher percent positive suggests higher transmission and that there are likely more people with coronavirus in the community who haven't been tested yet.

The percent positive is a critical measure because it gives us an indication how widespread infection is in the area where the testing is occurring—and whether levels of testing are keeping up with levels of disease transmission.

What is the big deal about the Delta Variant?

Data show that the Delta variant is roughly twice as contagious as the initial strain of COVID-19 and that it has a much higher viral load. Scientists and public health officials are still learning about how the delta variant affects children, including whether it is more severe for children than other COVID-19 strains.

The Delta variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is the dominant variant in Michigan and is significantly more contagious than the original form that entered the United States in winter 2020. While the risk of severe disease is lower in children, low risk does not equal no risk. In 23 states, 0.1% to 1.9% of all pediatric COVID cases resulted in hospitalization. Additionally, nearly one half of these hospitalizations are in children without reported underlying health conditions. As COVID-19 cases rise across the country, pediatric cases are rising alongside adult cases.

Data show that the COVID-19 vaccines are still effective in protecting fully vaccinated people from catching and spreading the virus, including the delta variant. But it is critical that you are fully vaccinated to be protected. A small number of vaccinated people can be infected by delta variant in a breakthrough infection and may be able to spread to others, but these cases represent a very small amount of community transmission occurring at this time.

Why is COVID-19 treated differently from Influenza or the "Flu"?

Influenza (flu) and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses. COVID-19 is caused by infection with a coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) first identified in late 2019, and flu is caused by infection with influenza viruses.

COVID-19 seems to spread more easily than flu. However, as more people become fully vaccinated against COVID-19, the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 should slow down. Compared to flu, COVID-19 can cause more serious illnesses in some people. COVID-19 can also take longer before people show symptoms and people can be contagious for longer.

While the virus that causes COVID-19 and flu viruses are thought to spread in similar ways, the virus that causes COVID-19 is generally more contagious than flu viruses. Also, COVID-19 has been observed to have more super-spreading events than flu. This means the virus that causes COVID-19 can quickly and easily spread to a lot of people and result in continual spreading among people as time progresses.

How do we get out of a pandemic state in our response to COVID-19?

We build towards herd immunity. This achieved when a virus stops circulating because a large segment of the population has already been infected or has been vaccinated against the virus.

Public health officials estimate that 70 to 85% of the population will need to be vaccinated before herd immunity is achieved. Until then, getting vaccinated and the 3 Ws – wearing a mask indoors (beyond your home), watching your distance, and washing your hands – are the best tools we have to stop the spread of the virus.

Health Department Role & Powers

What is the role of the local public health department?

As a local health department, BCHD's role is to protect and improve community well-being by preventing disease, illness and injury and impacting social, economic and environmental factors fundamental to excellent health for all residents. Through our programs aimed at health promotion, environmental health protection, public health preparedness, our community-oriented health services, and community-based public health assessment practices, we fulfill our mission of preventing disease, protecting health, and promoting an optimal quality of life for all.

Do local health departments have direct communication with the State health department to provide input from local context to help support decisions?

Local health department leadership and staff do have connections and communication pathways with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. The MDHHS Office of Local Public Health Services is our main linkage for these communications.

During COVID-19, the MDHHS has supported many workgroups made up of local and state public health officials. It has been in these workgroups that we have worked to share local context, advocate for local needs and work to build consensus of decision making. The local health department has not had direct control of final decisions and in some instances decisions have been made outside of MDHHS as well. The Berrien County Health Department will continue to prioritize staff involvement in these State level groups and work to have Berrien interests included in guidance and decisions made.

Where does local public health derive its authority from?

The Michigan legislature granted broad authority to public health departments in 1978 in the State Public Health Code. In 1994, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control adopted a list of 10 essential public health services to provide a national framework for national public health performance standards. The framework is a description of the public health activities that should be undertaken in all communities and define responsibilities of local public health systems.

What is the role of the Berrien County Board of Health?

The Berrien County Board of Health is an advisory body to the Berrien County Board of Commissioners. The Berrien County Board of Commissioners, are responsible for appointing members to the Board of Health. The Board of Health is responsible for providing leadership support to the Berrien County Health Department Health Officer and administrative team, supporting review, establishment and implementation of public health programs and policies, and advising the BOC on key health decisions for the County.

Can the Health Department issue a Mask Mandate?

Per powers granted through the Public Health Code, a local health department is able to issue a public health order for this action.

A public health order focuses one or more actions that must be taken in response to a specific event or risk. The goal of a local order is to encourage compliance for the sake of everyone's safety, not to penalize people. Violations to state and local orders can be reported to local law enforcement. Responses may vary according to the urgency of any given situation and the availability of law enforcement. First steps will always include education and engagement rather than penalties. Violating orders issued by the local health officer is a misdemeanor – but the goal is always to gain compliance through partnership and education, not to charge people with crimes.

The Berrien County Health Department does not take this power lightly and would only exercise when a situation deems it absolutely necessary to protecting the health of community individuals on a collective basis. This action would be based on local data and context and scientific research and guidance.

Other helpful resources for parents & community members:

Berrien County Health Department Website: www.bchdmi.org

- COVID-19 Cases & Data
- Resources for Schools & Daycares

CDC COVID-19 Data Tracker

Michigan MI Safe Start Map