



CORONAVIRUS IN MISSISSIPPI

'People are going to die needlessly': MSDH releases new guidelines in re- sponse to spike in Delta variant infections



by **Will Stribling**
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State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs stated how proud he is of Mississippians he has seen wearing masks as he's traveled the state. Dobbs joined Gov. Tate Reeves to answer questions during a Covid19 update press conference at Trustmark Park in Pearl on March 22, 2021. Credit: Vickie D. King/Mississippi Today

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The rapid rise of Delta variant cases and virus outbreaks combined with the state's low vaccination rate led the Mississippi Department of Health to release a slew of new COVID-related guidelines on Friday.

The new recommendations, which will stay in place through July 26, are:

- All Mississippi residents ages 65 and older, as well as anyone with a chronic underlying medical condition, should avoid all indoor mass gatherings regardless of their vaccination status.
- All unvaccinated Mississippians wear a mask when indoors in public settings.
- All Mississippians 12 years of age and older get vaccinated.

State Health Officer, Dr. Thomas Dobbs, said that these recommendations were decided on because Mississippians collectively have not done what it takes to protect us all, and MSDH wants to give the most vulnerable individuals the best guidance so they can survive the **Delta surge the state is facing**.

“At this pace, and given the sort of external dynamics that are in play here, we’re going to remain vulnerable for a long time,” Dobbs said. “I don’t think that we’re going to have some miraculous increase in our vaccination rate over the next few weeks, so people are going to die needlessly. And so when we look at who our most vulnerable people are, it’s going to be the people 65 and older, or who have chronic medical issues.”

While MSDH has made these new recommendations, they are just that. Mississippi has had next to no COVID-related restrictions at the state level since **Gov. Tate Reeves repealed most of them in March**.

The Delta strain is currently circulating much more quickly than other variants in Mississippi. Over the past two weeks, the number of Delta cases in Mississippi has increased more than fivefold, up from 29 to 137.

Delta is now also the dominant variant across the United States. Nationally, the average number of new cases has started to trend upwards due to localized Delta

outbreaks in places, like Mississippi, that have low vaccination rates. The Mississippi State Department of Health reported 427 new COVID-19 cases on Wednesday, the most for any one day since March 13.

The Delta variant has considerably increased the already high risks posed by the virus to unvaccinated people. Between June 3 and July 1, 95% of all COVID infections in Mississippi were among the unvaccinated. During that period, the same group also accounted for 90% of hospitalizations and 89% of deaths.

The vaccines are nearly as effective against the Delta variant as the original strain, greatly minimizing the chance of infection and nearly eliminating the risks of developing a serious illness. Studies suggest, however, that being fully vaccinated is the only adequate protection against the Delta variant, as a single shot of either of the two-dose mRNA vaccines provides only weak protection against infection. The Delta variant, first identified in India, is believed to be about 60% more contagious than the Alpha variant and up to twice as contagious as the original strain of COVID-19.

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On Thursday, Pfizer announced that it **[will seek emergency FDA authorization for a third booster shot](#)** that better protects against the Delta variant. Dobbs is already recommending that immunocompromised Mississippians get tested to check their antibody levels after getting vaccinated, and ask their doctors about getting a third dose if their immune system did not respond strongly to the first two doses.

State Epidemiologist Paul Byers added that the decision to receive a third dose right now will be on an individual basis and based on the physician/patient relationship.

“As far as an overall booster recommendation for a specific group, or for the total population, I think we are still not at that point yet,” Byers said. “That’s not a guarantee that we won’t be at a booster point down the road, but I think that the vaccines that we have right now are still showing effective long-term immunity.”

Despite the wide availability of vaccines and the risks posed by variants, Mississippi continues to rank last in the nation in the share of its population that has been

vaccinated. With over 2 million shots administered, only 31% of Mississippians have been fully vaccinated.

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