

COVID-19 Health System Updates

November 18, 2020, Wednesday

After a few weeks of relative stability, this week we saw an increase in COVID-19 inpatient admissions. We have been prepared for this for a long time, and in fact, we're prepared to care for significantly more COVID-19 patients should that need grow.

We have opened some of our surge spaces to help care for these patients, and there is much more available if we need it. We are also continuing to transfer patients among our hospitals so that we make sure every patient gets the right care, and no hospital becomes overwhelmed. Our warehouses are still stocked with many months' supply of PPE. We've welcomed traveling nurses to help us with caring for this increase in COVID-19 patients in our hospitals, and we're working with both the nursing agencies and our own union leaders to line up more help.

We need your help, too. It is quite clear that there is a wide spectrum of severity of COVID-19 infection. This includes people who have acute COVID-19 infection, yet with little or no symptoms. This, along with the return of cold weather and people becoming less careful with their behaviors, helps explain why we are seeing the return of higher rates of COVID-19. People feel fine, so maybe they let down their guard a little bit—either in the break room with their colleagues, or after work with their friends. It's understandable, but it's dangerous, too.

I wish I didn't have to say this, but right now, with rising community spread, you really need to assume that anyone you work with or see socially might have COVID-19, even if they look and feel fine, and even if you've known them for years. Keep masked, keep social distancing, and wash your hands frequently. Now more than ever, it's important to observe our [COVID-19 Code of Conduct](#).

It's important partly because a significant and growing number of your colleagues are now on home isolation after confirmed or suspected exposure to COVID-19. Many of them didn't realize they were risking exposure until it was too late. And now their health may be at risk, and they are unavailable to help you take care of our patients. Please don't add yourself to that list.

It's also a reminder that this situation could get much worse over the holidays if we're not careful. As you may have seen, Governor Cuomo has limited gatherings to 10 people, even at private homes. And even that many people together poses significant risks because of the nature of how the COVID-19 infection can spread. Being around large groups, particularly if you're eating or drinking and have your mask off, is just too risky.

As of this morning, we had 126 COVID-19-positive inpatients in our hospitals, 31 of whom were in critical care. This is the highest number we have seen in several months.

The New York State seven-day average test positivity rates stood yesterday at 2.5 percent for New York City, 3.2 percent for Long Island, and 3.7 percent for the Mid-Hudson region. All three are up significantly since last week.

Travel and Visitor Policy Reminders

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, New York State has updated its travel policy to apply to all travel outside New York and our five neighboring states—New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont. If you're planning to travel outside the region for Thanksgiving, please review the Mount Sinai [travel policy](#), and be sure you have enough PTO available to quarantine when you get back.

The details are really complicated, but it comes down to this:

- You cannot come back to work until you've either quarantined for 14 days, or received a negative COVID-19 nasal swab (PCR) test after you return. While you

can take this test for return-to-work purposes as soon as you're back, you will need to quarantine while you wait for the results.

- That negative PCR test can clear you to go back to work, but you might still have to quarantine for additional days whenever you're not working, depending on where you live.
- The only way to avoid quarantining after you travel is to travel only within New York and our five neighboring states.

The New York State rules also apply to visitors who come from outside the region to see patients at our hospitals. Visitors must obey the state's quarantine and testing rules before they can enter our hospitals. Details are in the [visitor policy](#) on our website. And please remember that strict limits on the number of visitors per patient are still in effect, including on Thanksgiving Day.

How to Get Tested

Since the travel policy now includes a testing component, here is some helpful information. We are working to improve access to testing for all Mount Sinai employees, and in the meantime, you can get information [here](#) on how to get an **asymptomatic** nasal swab (PCR) or antibody test for COVID-19 at a Mount Sinai facility. In addition, many urgent care practices, including [CityMD](#), offer testing without an appointment.

Vaccine Update

If you read the news, you saw this week that a second vaccine, by Moderna, is also showing a lot of promise in early test results. This is more good news, and more evidence that someday soon, this crisis will be behind us.

Behind the Scenes

"I did not anticipate how difficult it was—both for me and for the people who were turning to me for answers—to hear myself saying, 'I just don't know' as often as I did during the early days of the pandemic."

Candid insights like this, and a look at the progress of COVID-19 vaccines, are offered by a central figure in our COVID-19 response, Judith Aberg, MD, the Dr. George Baehr Professor of Clinical Medicine, Chief of Infectious Diseases, and principal investigator of multiple COVID-19 prevention and treatment trials at Mount Sinai. Read it [here](#).

It can be heartbreaking to watch the news these days. So many places, especially in the Midwest, are now going through what we experienced in March and April—the tent hospitals, the halts in elective surgery, the fears about PPE supplies, and the need for refrigerated morgue trucks. We feel for our health care colleagues elsewhere in the country. No one should have to experience that.

But I do want you to know that, despite our increased number of COVID-19 patients and the talk about reimposing some more stringent social distancing rules, we are a long way from going back there ourselves. We have some of the best predictive modelers anywhere. Their models are built on rich datasets from our hard-won experience. And they show that the current wave in New York City will likely peak far lower than what we experienced before—and well within our current capacity.

New Yorkers know what some parts of the country are only now discovering: that hand hygiene, masking, and social distancing, if rigorously observed, make a real difference in slowing the spread of COVID-19. Let's rededicate ourselves to those simple but effective techniques. Let's try our best to avoid becoming overwhelmed with the news of the day, and to use our [wellness resources](#) whenever they might be helpful. Let's make time to connect with extended family, virtually and in a safe way, next week for Thanksgiving. And let's be proud that we are Mount Sinai, and we can overcome this, together.

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