

COVID-19 Health System Updates, March 10, 2021

There is mixed news again this week, as there has been so often during this pandemic—frustrating trends along with good ones, reasons for hope and reasons for concern. We've learned to live with these dueling narratives, but that doesn't make them easier to accept and process.

Let's start with the frustrating, and hopefully short-lived, trend. It is now clear that our COVID-19 caseloads stopped decreasing at the end of February and have remained relatively stable since then. As of this morning, we had 462 COVID-19-positive inpatients across the system, with 85 of them in critical care.

It is not clear why this is occurring. The New York State seven-day average test positivity rates, at 3.9 percent for New York City, 4.2 percent for Long Island, and 4.3 percent for the mid-Hudson region as of yesterday, are lower than they were the last time we saw case numbers behaving like this. Midwinter events like the Super Bowl might have led to some spread, but not likely on the scale of the holidays.

Nevertheless, the patients are here, and we have to take care of them. To help you do that, we are continuing to transfer patients as necessary to provide them the best care while balancing the numbers in our hospitals. We are also still working as hard as we can to recruit new staff nurses as well as traveling nurses, and to fill the gaps in the meantime with bonus overtime and redeploying staff from less busy areas.

My commitment to you is the same as it was last week. Everyone involved in patient care at our hospitals needs a break, and we will not stop until we have found a way to get you one. But how, and how quickly, we do this depends in part on what happens with these patient numbers. We remain optimistic that with the return of warmer weather and the continued increase in vaccinations, we will be in a much better place before too long.

On vaccinations, we have settled into the rhythm of the new process we launched a couple of weeks ago, in which we have been reaching out individually to our most vulnerable eligible patients to offer them vaccine appointments. The patients have been responding, and I am happy to say that we have been able to vaccinate them in significant numbers now that we have been getting a steady supply of vaccine from the state. As of today, New York State is making people 60 and older eligible for the vaccine, and certain categories of government, not-for-profit, and building-service workers will be eligible starting next Wednesday, March 17.

We have also continued to vaccinate eligible members of our Mount Sinai family; if you have not yet enrolled for vaccination, and you are an onsite faculty or staff member, student, or trainee, or a voluntary physician or member of their staff, you can still put your name on the [waiting list](#), and we will get to you soon. If you are working remotely and are 60 and over or have a [qualifying medical condition](#), your best bet continues to be trying to get an appointment via the [New York State](#) or [New York City](#) websites, or [vaccinefinder.org](#), a new site backed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

You may have seen that the CDC recently issued new [guidelines](#) for people who are fully vaccinated—meaning that at least two weeks have passed since their second shot of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, or since their only shot of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The CDC says that fully vaccinated people can now gather at home, without masks or distancing, with each other, and with unvaccinated people if they are all from one household and are at low risk for severe COVID-19. These guidelines reflect the increasing evidence we are seeing that the COVID-19 vaccines work well in the real world—which is critical to bringing an end to this pandemic.

For now, we are keeping in place the rules around masking and social distancing on Mount Sinai property. So if you are having lunch in the break room, please observe social distancing when your mask is off, even if everyone in the room has been vaccinated. Masking is still required for faculty

and staff at all of our facilities. And of course, it is critical to keep wearing full PPE, including eye or face shields, when you are examining a patient.

Meet Our Scientists

Miriam Merad, MD, PhD, a pioneering immunologist, is seeking to understand why some patients develop severe forms of COVID-19 and some do not. In the very earliest days of the pandemic, her team helped identify the “cytokine storm,” an intense inflammatory response to the virus that sometimes proves fatal. Now she is leading an effort with Alexander Charney, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, and Genetics and Genomic Sciences, and Co-Director of the Mount Sinai Clinical Intelligence Center, to use state-of-the-art technologies in immunology and genomics, like RNA sequencing, to gain valuable insight into patients with active COVID-19 infection and convalescent patients. The team is also studying the immune response after vaccination.

This effort, the Mount Sinai COVID-19 Biobank, is a partnership between the Mount Sinai Clinical Intelligence Center and Human Immune Monitoring Center that arose during the pandemic to rapidly collect blood samples from COVID-19 patients admitted to our hospitals and serve as the backbone for research.

Some patients who recover from COVID-19 continue to have symptoms that affect their quality of life, says Dr. Merad, the Mount Sinai Professor in Cancer Immunology and Director of the Precision Immunology Institute. “We will be following these patients for a long time, because we need to monitor the resolution of inflammation and the quality of the immune response that these patients develop and see whether this response is protective. There is still a lot to learn.” Read more about the research [here](#).

Weekly Tip of the CAP

It’s important that we continue to create space for you to connect with your colleagues, appreciate your hard work, and pause to take time for yourself. [Click here](#) to see photos of last week’s Tip of the CAP events across Mount Sinai. Seeing that so many of you made the time to connect with each other

gives me hope that we'll eventually emerge from this crisis as a stronger community than ever before.

Reminder: A Moment of Reflection

This time last year, COVID-19 was a poorly understood illness causing great uncertainty and anxiety as cases began to multiply here in New York. Now it has become the defining factor in how we live our lives and do our work. COVID-19 left many of us physically separated from those we love and forced us to face the escalating challenge of caring for our community.

I am taking time this week to reflect on all we have been through together in the last year and the pride and gratitude I feel to belong to this Mount Sinai community. As a part of the process of acknowledging what we have lost and how our lives have changed, while appreciating how far we have come, I invite you to join me in observing a moment of reflection together on this historic anniversary.

Moment of Reflection Across Mount Sinai

Thursday, March 11

10:30 am

4:30 pm

11:30 pm

Through this moment of reflection, and the continuing Tip of the CAP events, I hope we can all find the renewed strength and commitment to keep going, as we must, until we reach the end of this terrible pandemic. With expanding vaccination efforts and eligibility, and careful observance of masking and social distancing precautions, I am confident that we will.

Vicki R. LoPachin, MD, MBA

Senior Vice President

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