

BERKS COUNTY COVID-19 HEALTH ADVISORY PANEL

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COVID-19 PREVENTION AND MITIGATION

Coronavirus Disease 2019, better known as COVID-19, is a preventable illness. When it does occur, it is possible to mitigate symptoms, reduce serious outcomes and prevent further spread of the virus through documented public health measures and science-based medical care. It is the purpose of these recommendations to emphasize evidence-based, factual information that will reduce the presence of COVID-19 in our community, bring the current pandemic to an end and allow businesses, schools, hospitals, religious institutions, families and individuals to live our lives in a community free of pandemic fear and restrictions.

Attention to these measures is particularly important when a community is contending with a surge in cases, as we have seen occur from new variants of the disease. While the widespread variants identified to date have been reasonably responsive to the vaccines and therapies that have been recommended, there is a very real potential for an even more dangerous variant to emerge in the future. It is critical for everyone in our community to make concerted efforts to follow the lead of our public health agencies and take the necessary steps to suppress this virus, restrict its ability to further mutate, and end the pandemic. In support of such efforts, the Berks County COVID-19 Health Advisory Panel, established by the Berks County Commissioners and composed of local healthcare experts, makes the following recommendations:

1) Medical decisions and patient education efforts regarding COVID-19 must be based on the most scientific, fact-based data available. Misinformation will cause further harm and serve to prolong the pandemic. Medical treatments must follow the best available evidence-based recommendations. In particular, experimental therapies such as hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin, which have no proven clinical value for COVID-19 and may cause serious harm, are to be avoided. Patient and community health guidelines must be obtained from reputable sources, such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Pennsylvania Department of Health. Other trusted sources include professional medical organizations such as The Infectious Disease Society of America, The American Academy of Pediatrics, The American College of Physicians and The American Academy of Family Physicians.

2) Everyone who is eligible should receive one of the approved vaccines and an appropriate booster vaccination as they become available to their age group. Completion of a full course of one of the FDA approved COVID-19 vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson) has been shown to be the most effective means to prevent serious disease, hospitalizations and death from COVID-19. These vaccines have been administered in more than 380 million doses and have been shown to be both effective and safe. Therefore, physicians have an ethical responsibility to provide factual information regarding COVID-19 vaccines and to encourage all eligible individuals (including themselves) to complete a full course of vaccination. (www.cdc.gov ; www.fda.gov ; www.health.pa.gov)

3) All individuals should practice appropriate disease mitigation measures as recommended by public health authorities. Mitigation of COVID-19 spread can be enhanced through proven public health measures, including the wearing of masks (particularly in indoor settings), social distancing of 6 feet and frequent hand washing and cleansing of high-touch surfaces. Appropriate masking has been shown to reduce disease spread and can be an effective measure to keep individuals safe, especially children who cannot yet receive the vaccine, and allows for the safe reopening of schools and businesses. Further, there is no reputable information that masking harms healthy individuals, including children. The American Academy of Pediatrics is on record as advocating for masks for children to help keep them safe. (www.cdc.gov; www.aap.org; www.health.pa.gov; www.education.pa.gov; www.berksiu.org)

4) If a person is ill, they should stay home and have COVID-19 testing as appropriate. Based on the testing results and the recommendations of a healthcare provider, the individual should follow the guidelines for isolation and family quarantining. Any contacts who may have been exposed to the infected person should follow CDC guidelines and the direction of public health case investigators and contact tracers. (www.cdc.gov; www.pa.gov/guides)