Physical Gatherings, The COVID-19 Vaccines, and Protecting the Health of Your Congregation

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The Omicron Variant

- 11/12/21 WHO declares Omicron variant a new variant of concern
- About 50 mutations
- 30 mutations in the spike protein
- Several spike mutations are thought to make the virus more infectious
- Found worldwide and in all US States

Omicron Variant vs Delta Variant

• Symptoms – see chart:

• Transmissibility: 2.7 to 3.7 times higher than Delta variant

• Severity of illness compared to Delta:
  • 53% reduced risk of hospitalization
  • 74% reduced risk of ICU admission
  • 91% reduced risk of death

• Deaths compared to Delta:
  • Omicron: 9 deaths per 1,000 cases
  • Delta: 13 deaths per 1,000 cases

• Long COVID:
  • Fatigue, "brain fog," headaches, joint/muscle pain
  • High levels of anxiety, depression, and insomnia
  • Patients with mild to moderate COVID infections

• Omicron BA.2 subvariant:
  • 1.5 fold more infectious than original BA.1 but same severity
  • Rapidly taking over BA.1 – detected in 57 countries
Omicron Variant vs Delta Variant

New reported cases

Update – Global and U.S.

• As of 02/02/2022 (6:48 am)
  • 381,724,054 confirmed cases
  • 5,688,009 deaths

• US: 75,350,359 confirmed cases
• US: 890,770 deaths

• [https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6](https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6)
COVID-19 Forecast:

Interventions
**Interventions - Vaccines**

- **Vaccination:**
  - Effective against Omicron
  - Third dose of mRNA vaccines – Delta and Omicron Variants (preventing 94% and 82% of urgent care/emergency encounters; preventing 94% and 90% of hospitalizations)
  - Safe: 10.1 billion doses given
  - Reinfection: unvaccinated are 2 to 5 times more likely to get reinfected than fully vaccinated

Source:
- [CDC's Vaccine Coverage Data](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7104e3.htm?s_cid=mm7104e3_x)
- [NY Times Covid Cases Interactive](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html)
Interventions - Vaccines

Sources: Our World in Data (world vaccinations); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S. vaccinations)  
Note: Vaccination and booster data in some countries are available infrequently. Sweden data for booster doses is available only from Jan. 20, 2022.

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/02/01/science/covid-deaths-united-states.html
Interventions – Masks/Respirators

- Efficacy of face masks/respirators:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFECTED INDIVIDUAL</th>
<th>UNINFECTED INDIVIDUAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth mask</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposable mask</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical mask</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respirator N95</td>
<td>2.5 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These results were published last spring, before the omicron variant, which is believed to spread more easily than earlier variants.
Source: American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists Pandemic Task Force
Interventions – Masks/Respirators

• Wear the highest quality mask/respirator, you can find:
  • N95 Respirator > KN95 Respirators > Procedure/Medical Masks > Cloth Masks

• Cloth Masks: high-quality cloth mask (multiple layers, close knit fabric)
• Make sure that the mask/respirator fits snugly against your face
Interventions – Face Shields

• Larger aerosols are successfully blocked (96%).

• Smaller aerosols are blocked only 68% of the time.

• Always combine a face shield with a mask for adequate protection.

Interventions - Social Distancing

- Germany:
  - In comparison to a no-social-distancing benchmark, within three weeks, the policies avoided 84% of the potential COVID-19 cases (point estimate: 499.3K) and 66% of the potential fatalities (5.4K).

- Brazil and Sweden, primarily averse to lockdown policies, revealed deteriorating trends.

- Countries that adopt strict lockdown have better addressed the spread of the virus.

https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34550995/#:~:text=In%20comparison%20to%20a%20no%20social%20distancing%20benchmark%2C%20within%20three%20weeks%2C%20the%20policies%20avoided%2084%25%20of%20the%20potential%20COVID-19%20cases%20(point%20estimate%3A%20499.3K)%20and%2066%25%20of%20the%20potential%20fatalities%20(5.4K).%20
Interventions - Testing

All commercially available tests detect the current variants

Home Tests:

• Free tests (4 for every home): [https://www.covidtests.gov/](https://www.covidtests.gov/)

Testing Sites - Free:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winston-Salem</td>
<td>Bowman Gray Stadium (West lot) 1250 S. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive</td>
<td>Mon - Fri, 9 am - 6 pm; Sat, 10 am - 3 pm</td>
<td>Outdoor, drive-thru site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Point</td>
<td>Providence Place 1701 Westchester Drive, Suite 850</td>
<td>Mon - Fri, 9 am - 6 pm; Sat, 10 am - 3 pm</td>
<td>Indoor site, follow signs to parking and entrance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkesboro</td>
<td>In partnership with the Town of Wilkesboro and the County of Wilkes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowe’s Park at River’s Edge 1610 Industrial Dr</td>
<td>Mon - Fri, 9 am - 6 pm; Sat, 10 am - 3 pm</td>
<td>Outdoor, drive-thru site</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please Use Community Testing Sites for Free COVID-19 Testing

If you have been exposed to COVID-19 or are experiencing symptoms, it's important that you get tested as quickly as possible.

Please do not go to the Emergency Department or an Urgent Care location if you only need a COVID-19 test.

Go to the ED or call 911 only if it's a life-threatening emergency.
Interventions - Treatment

NIH COVID-19 Treatment Guidelines:

• Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP, tixagevimab plus cilgavimab [Evusheld]) for adults and adolescents who do not have SARS-CoV-2 infection, who have not been recently exposed to an individual with SARS-CoV-2 infection, AND who:
  • Are moderately to severely immunocompromised and may have inadequate immune response to COVID-19 vaccination (BIIa); or
  • Are not able to be fully vaccinated with any available COVID-19 vaccines due to a documented history of severe adverse reaction to a COVID-19 vaccine or any of its components (Alla).

• Therapeutic Management of Nonhospitalized Adults With COVID-19

• COVID-19 Treatment Guidelines Panel's Statement on Therapies for High-Risk, Nonhospitalized Patients With Mild to Moderate COVID-19

CAVEAT: Limited supply of anti-COVID-19 therapeutics

https://www.covid19treatmentguidelines.nih.gov/
Risk Assessment
Congregational Settings – Risk Assessment

Goal: Return to In-Person Services

• Check State-Issued Prevention Measures

• Monitor Local Risk Levels:
  • CDC COVID Tracker - Community Data: https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatrace
Congregational Settings – Risk Assessment

Goal: Return to In-Person Services

• Determine Risk Factors:
  • Presence of individuals/groups at higher risk (e.g., older adults, individuals with pre-existing conditions such as chronic respiratory illnesses or cancer)
  • Vaccination status – difficult to assess
  • Testing status – availability, costs
  • Willingness to adhere to interventions such as masking, social distancing etc.

• Weighing against:
  • Need for in-person contact
  • Communion with others
  • Worship experience

https://www.signupgenius.com/blog/church-group-organizing-resources.cfm
Guidance
Congregational Settings – Guidance I

Tips for In–Person Gatherings:

• Limit the number attending based on the space available.

• Social distancing at 3 feet. In some instances, this will mean moving to a larger room for bigger events.

• All attendees should be masked (e.g., N95 respirators preferred or procedure/medical face mask or high-quality cloth masks with multiple layers and close knit fabric).

• Wearing face shields is encouraged but should not replace a respirator/mask.

• If possible, ventilation within the meeting area should be increased by opening windows or doors.
Congregational Settings – Guidance II

Serving of beverages and/or food should be discouraged. If being served, the guidance below can be followed:

• Only use prepackaged food and beverages or pre-plated meals. Buffet style catering should be served by catering staff.

• Attendees will wear masks while not eating, including during distribution of pre-packaged food items and prepared beverages and after eating.

• Utensils for beverage or food consumption (e.g., pitchers, cutlery, etc.) should not be shared. Use of disposable items is recommended.

• Recommendation to place families, known contacts together at tables when eating without masks
Congregational Settings – Guidance III

Tips for Group Activities:

• **Children** - follow local school guidance ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html)):
  - Universal indoor masking (ages 2 years and older)
  - Kids less than 2 years of age do not need masking but contact should be limited to their parents/care givers
  - Ventilation, handwashing and respiratory etiquette, staying home when sick and getting tested
  - Isolation/quarantine time reduced to 5 days

  - Get vaccinated - vaccines (mRNA) show a 94% reduced risk of COVID-19 hospitalizations
  - Wear a well-fitted mask
  - Wash your hands often
  - Test to prevent spread to others
  - Increase ventilation in meeting spaces
Congregational Settings – Guidance IV

Tips for Group Activities:

• Choir/Singing/Live Musical Performances:
  • Increased risk of transmission
  • Performers - Vaccination status
  • Environmental Risk Mitigation:
    • Space
    • Increased ventilation
    • Distance from each other
    • Distance from audience
    • Duration of performances (shorter are better)

• Singing masks and instrument (bell) covers are available

• Resources:
  • Meyer et al. Reentry Following COVID-19: Concerns for Singers
  • American Choral Directors: https://acda.org/resources-for-choral-professionals-during-a-pandemic
Congregational Settings – Guidance V

Sharing a Microphone

• If masked, o.k., if not masked discouraged especially if the microphone is in close proximity to the mouth

Air Purifiers:

• Effective against COVID-19
• Dependent on space and air exchange
• No immediate effect but reduction of overall burden over time

Need for Contact Tracing:

• Limited use at current state of pandemic
Congregational Settings – Guidance VI

Recommended Resource:
• Cleveland Clinic – Returning to Sacred Spaces Amid COVID-19
Outlook
When and How

• The omicron variant poses a real challenge due to high transmissibility.

• Current projections indicate a decline in community cases over the next few weeks.

• The situation in each setting may vary requiring an individual risk assessment as outlined above.

• The option to offer both in-person and online services may allow gradual loosening of restrictions. In-person home visits of members at higher risk may offer another safe option to (re-)connect.

• Vaccination is safe and the best available strategy to overcome the pandemic.
Faith Based Settings...

What should we do now?

• Every congregation and physical facility is different
• Balancing spiritual, community, congregation and individual needs with health and safety
Thanks

Marktkirche, Hannover, Germany