



FAMILY HEALTHCARE OF FAIRFAX, PC

AN EARLY STATE OF THE (COVID) UNION ADDRESS January 9, 2022

Dear Patients:

The Omicron variant is here in a big way and all of us are being asked to adjust our lives again. The bad news: case counts are at least twice the previous highest pandemic peaks all around the country. The concern is that the sheer volume of cases will result in many hospitalizations and deaths.



The good news is that Omicron infections tend to be mild and lead to fewer hospitalizations and deaths. Although we are seeing more Covid cases in our practice than at any time since the pandemic began, we are truly grateful to report no deaths or hospitalizations. A mild case of Covid ranges from a sniffle and scratchy throat to an illness equivalent to severe flu lasting 7–14 days, even in vaccinated and boosted individuals.

All of the cases in our practice are in vaccinated individuals and almost all have had booster shots. It is important to note that up to 40% of cases in vaccinated people are asymptomatic and those individuals are spreading the virus to others. Holiday gatherings, weddings and other indoor activities have been the source of most of the infections in our practice and until the Omicron surge declines, we expect many more patients to catch Covid.

It's crucial for all patients to understand that this variant will not be stopped by the usual measures. If you are in a high-risk category, you need to isolate from others as best as you can until this surge declines, hopefully in 3 to 4 weeks. We have previously suggested that testing before gatherings would be safer, but it is very clear after the recent holidays that this strategy is not effective for preventing infections. What is clear is that vaccinated and boosted (and tested) individuals can easily spread the virus to vaccinated and boosted individuals.

NEW PROTOCOLS TO KEEP YOU SAFE

We ask you to follow these protocols to ensure we can care for you appropriately during this surge in Covid.

If you have cold symptoms or symptoms compatible with Covid: *Call and schedule a video visit.* Please do not text or call Cathy or me directly. The number of inquiries is beyond our ability to respond to immediately and every call is different, requiring more time than you may anticipate. We can best handle each case with a scheduled virtual visit to allow enough time to address all the issues as they pertain to your unique situation.

If it is appropriate to be seen by one of us, we will schedule a drive up visit and PCR test. Each visit will outline a conservative care plan which includes over the counter medication. We have also had success with certain prescription medications for troublesome Covid symptoms.

Avoid heading to an urgent care center or emergency room. Those facilities are overwhelmed and waiting times are measured in hours. Sitting in a crowded waiting room places you at risk of catching Covid or flu.

If you are in a high-risk category and develop Covid symptoms: *schedule a virtual visit ASAP.* Call early during office hours and we will take care of you on the same day. If we determine you are eligible for one of the new treatments, we will do our best to arrange that for you.

If you have Covid symptoms: isolate as best as possible from family and friends until your diagnosis is determined by testing, or isolate for a total of 7 days. (We are not in agreement with the recent CDC recommendation of 5 days of isolation)

OUR SOLUTIONS FOR THE TESTING KITS SHORTAGE

Testing supplies are limited everywhere, including in our practice. Testing before holidays, before and after travel, after potential exposure, and routinely at schools and universities, along with test hoarding and of course Omicron have made it nearly impossible to obtain rapid antigen tests. In principle, widespread testing is a good idea but unfortunately, the supply of tests is currently inadequate for the type of widespread testing proposed by public health officials. Even at our office, we do not know when we will receive our ordered supply. You probably would not be surprised to hear how frustrating it is to be rationing rapid tests for our patients at this point in the pandemic.

A more rational use of the limited rapid antigen tests may look like this:

An adequate supply is ensured at primary care offices. Rapid tests are needed most for those in high-risk categories. New treatments for Covid are reserved for vulnerable individuals but they must have a positive test and be treated within 5 days of diagnosis. We believe the federal and state government should act to supply primary care offices with rapid test kits. We are the ones who must quickly identify and treat high-risk individuals, and best positioned to utilize a scarce resource efficiently.

The limited supply of tests is focused on vulnerable patients who become symptomatic. We need immediate messaging from federal and state health officials urging people to reduce inappropriate testing and hoarding. I acknowledge that we shouldn't be in this position, but we need to be practical and deal with the situation at hand. I cannot imagine sending an elderly sick patient to stand in a two-hour line to get a test. Something must change – immediately.

Inappropriate testing is reduced, significantly. Testing after likely exposure should happen between 3 and 5 days after the last exposure to that individual. Testing earlier will likely be negative and you may be positive later. This is a wasted test. Avoid repeat testing if you are asymptomatic. If you test negative between days 3–5 after exposure, it is safe to assume you cannot pass the virus to others if you have not been exposed to a person with Covid since the initial exposure. If you are exposed and young and healthy, it may make sense during this Omicron surge to isolate for 7 days without testing.

Regular testing of healthy students is stopped. With an unlimited supply of tests, this may be reasonable but healthy, asymptomatic students are the least likely to have serious illness and should remain in school. Before anyone gets outraged about this suggestion, you need to know that most young people will get the virus, carry it with minimal or no symptoms and test negative before 7 days. Therefore, a large percentage of cases will be missed even with regular testing and many infected students will have already passed the virus to others before testing positive. Keeping infected but otherwise healthy students home causes many problems not only academically and socially but also medically if the emergency babysitter is a high-risk parent or grandparent. Tests need to be available for teachers and staff and for the millions of high-risk patients who can be treated to prevent severe illness. The message has always been and should remain – if a student is sick, keep them home and send them back to school when well (or after a negative rapid test).

Living with Covid

In our last newsletter we discussed endemic Covid and proposed strategies for living with the virus. We believe the current surge of Omicron, the testing shortage and the very limited supply of new treatments is temporary. At Family Healthcare we are constantly adjusting to conditions on the ground and hope that our communications help you adjust as well. It is frustrating to realize that our health authorities are constantly playing catch up and confusing us with their messaging. They should be better than this after two years of the pandemic, but we remain hopeful that Omicron and the testing shortages will quickly be behind us. We may need to write off January and part of February, but the rest of the year will be better. Fingers

crossed.

Best wishes to all for a healthy 2022.

Sincerely,

Cathy Tong, CFNP
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