

COVID-19 UPDATE 1/3/2022

GRR FIRE DEPARTMENT

The Gallatin City County Health Department website provides the most authoritative local information about COVID-19, <https://www.healthygallatin.org/>. For additional information and updates, go to: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

The Delta variant caused a wave of infections during the fall and is still active. This variant is more infectious than previous ones and tends to cause more serious illness than some earlier ones. The Omicron variant emerged in December of 2021 and is spreading rapidly throughout the world, including the US. Omicron is driving a large spike in infections, which may get worse following the Christmas and New Year holiday season.

Omicron is much more infectious than any previous variant. This variant partially evades antibodies generated by previous COVID infections and vaccines. Thus, there are more “breakthrough” infections in people who previously had COVID (especially the variants before Delta), and those who were vaccinated more than six months ago. The good news is that the mRNA vaccine boosters are quite effective in preventing Omicron infections. Prior infection and/or vaccination do reduce the risk of severe disease from Omicron, though people with weak immune systems remain at risk. Vaccination in previously infected people will help prevent them from getting Omicron.

To reduce your risk from Omicron, get a booster if you are eligible, or get vaccinated if you have not already done so. Facemasks remain a vital tool to prevent spread of this highly infectious variant; you can improve your protection by using KN95 or equivalent facemasks. These provide much more protection than cloth facemasks and are now readily available. Masks are particularly important in indoor public environments and while traveling by air. Don’t forget good hand hygiene; all COVID viruses are susceptible to good hand washing and alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

The “wild cards” in all of this include influenza and future COVID variants. It looks like influenza may be a bigger problem in the winter of 2022 than it was in 2021. How big a problem is uncertain. One of the influenza strains circulating now is not covered by the current influenza vaccines. There are several reasons that influenza matters. First, it is a respiratory infection similar to COVID, so everyone who gets influenza will have to stay away from school or the workplace and get tested. Second, some people will get sick enough to need hospital care and some of them will die. They “clog up” a healthcare system that is already straining from COVID. Third, influenza weakens the immune system when the person is sick with it, increasing their potential susceptibility to COVID. The good news is that facemasks, distancing, and good hand hygiene are quite effective at influenza prevention. Even though one active influenza strain is not covered by the vaccination, the vaccination covers three others and it increases the non-specific defenses against all influenza strains.

The other “wild card” is future COVID mutations. It is biologically inevitable that there will be mutations in Delta and Omicron—how those will affect us all remains to be seen. The more

Omicron cases there are, the more likely a new Omicron-based mutation will occur and nobody can predict how that one will behave.

Vaccine Cards and Documentation

Everyone vaccinated receives a CDC COVID-19 Vaccination Record Card. This card includes your name and date of birth and documents your vaccinations. This card is not a “vaccination passport”. It simply documents your vaccination. We recommend you do the following with your card:

1. Take a photograph or scan of the card and save it on your phone or computer, or
2. Make photocopies of the card
3. If you received your vaccination at a location other than your healthcare provider’s office: send a copy, scan, or photograph to your healthcare provider’s office so it can be entered in your healthcare record. That way, if you lose your card, your healthcare provider will have a record of your vaccination status.
4. Keep the card in a safe location where you won’t lose it. We recommend you keep it with your passport (if you have one), or where you keep your social security card or your vehicle title documents.
5. Don’t laminate the card; it has spots to document booster shots if they become necessary. If you want to carry a laminated version, make a copy and laminate it.

Documentation of vaccination into the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) Immunization Information System, imMTrax, is automatic at most healthcare offices. If you get vaccinated through the County Health Department you have to give specific permission for them to share your data with that system. We strongly recommend you give your vaccination provider permission to enter your vaccination documentation into that system. In case you lose your card, that system will contain the documentation you might need in the future to prove your vaccination.