

TO YOUR HEALTH

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"To Mask or Not to Mask"

Susan Cusson, NP

Back in May, when the positivity rate of COVID-19 cases was very low, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) issued guidance that vaccinated people no longer needed to wear masks in public places. The Delta variant was, at that time, a problem elsewhere in the world. The Delta variant first arose in India in February/March of this year, quickly spread around the world and is now the dominant strain in the United States.

In the recent outbreak on Cape Cod, 74% of those who tested positive were vaccinated. This study shows a different picture than we'd been seeing and indicates a much higher level of contagion than previously known. While the vaccines continue to protect very well against serious illness and death, they appear to be less effective at preventing the spread of COVID-19. Studies show that vaccinated people carry a much larger amount of virus in their noses when infected with the Delta variant compared with other variants. This is why it is more contagious. We're seeing a lot more breakthrough infections now that Delta is the predominant strain in the US. The good news about Delta is that the vaccines still protect well against serious illness. Nearly all people requiring hospitalization are unvaccinated.

Local mask mandates, state regulations and federal guidelines are ever changing and keeping up to date with the latest information is challenging. Knowing whether to "mask up" or not depends on the situation. Sometimes the decision is made for us, other times we have a choice.

Two months ago the CDC advised that fully vaccinated individuals could safely resume pre-pandemic activities without wearing a mask or physically distancing except where required by laws, rules, regulations, or local guidance. On July 27 that guidance changed due to concern about the Delta variant. On July 30 the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) issued an advisory that a fully vaccinated person should wear a mask when indoors (and not in your own home) if you have a weakened immune system or are at increased risk because of your age or an underlying medical condition.

In Massachusetts, regardless of vaccination status, masks are mandatory on public and private transportation systems, in healthcare facilities and in other settings hosting vulnerable populations, such as congregate care settings.

Carleton-Willard is a licensed healthcare facility and therefore mandated to follow DPH guidelines. In addition to wearing a mask in common areas at CWV, and in public indoor spaces, it is prudent to wear a mask when gathering indoors with anyone you don't live with. When outdoors, it is generally very safe to go without a mask.

Throughout the pandemic, precautions such as masks decreased not only the spread of COVID-19 but many other infectious illnesses commonly spread via human to human contact. Common colds and flu were drastically reduced by mask wearing. Stomach viruses were also much less common due to a decrease in person to person contact and better hand hygiene and surface cleaning.

The impacts of the pandemic are far reaching and I think it's safe to say we're all ready to ditch the masks. It sure is nice to see faces again, and we should continue to do that when it's safe. The barometer for "safe" seems to change as often as the weather in New England. As we head into the fall and flu season approaches, the habits we learned during the pandemic could pay off in other ways.

Just like flu shots, vaccination against COVID-19 is not perfect, but it clearly helps protect against the worst outcomes. With the highly contagious Delta variant, it's best to continue to avoid large groups and when in doubt wear a mask. If you're vaccinated, refrain from large gatherings and mask up, chances are good you'll be okay. We're in a much better place than we were in 2020, but we're not out of the woods just yet.

Next question: will we need a booster? The jury is still out on that one....stay tuned!



Reflecting Through Group Work

Maeve Lobo, LICSW

Groupwork is sewn into the fabric of Carleton Willard Village. Frances Willard used groups to focus attention on the temperance movement and eventually the call to universal suffrage. Founding her first home in Boston's South End, Elizabeth Abbott Carleton assisted older adults to live in a safe and comfortable community. Groups continue to remain a vibrant part of this community and come in various forms. The Clinic is aiming to create more groups to enable Residents to flourish in their older years.

Historically, groupwork has its origins in faith-based movements like the YMCA and the London Ragged School. Settlement Houses adopted this approach to assist women and children. This has evolved over time and embraces a variety of philosophies and ideas. The primary objective of a group is to engage an individual and explore issues pertinent to their lives. A group helps initiate a conversation and provide tools to overcome difficulties or differences. It can also be supportive and informational in nature.

The Woman's Circle is the most established group the Clinic coordinates currently. There are three groups that run monthly. All of them are small in nature and generate lively and reflective discussions. A theme is assigned to all the participants to consider at the group. During the COVID 19 lockdown this group migrated onto ZOOM. Though difficult, we managed to sustain a conversation over those trying months.

More recently the Clinic has resurrected the No-see-ums group. It is a supportive group mainly focusing on those with a vision impairment. The Clinic is collaborating with the Mass Commission of the Blind and the Perkins Library to provide tools and support for our Residents. As restrictions lift the aim is to invite speakers to these meetings.

Our well-being over the pandemic has been compromised, and we have had a plenty of time to consider the incremental losses of the last year. For an older population this has been very debilitating. To help Residents through this difficult period the Clinic is running a five-session program on Pandemic Loss. This program will be repeated in the fall. Dates will be announced in the September "To Your Health" and in the monthly calendar. Information is also available in the Clinic. The group is ideally suited for Residents who have encountered frustration and sadness through the pandemic.

Please reach out to the Clinic Social Worker, Maeve Lobo, if you have any questions or are interested in joining any of the Clinic groups. If you have ideas for starting a new group, Maeve would be happy to facilitate a meeting. Illness and grief are areas that are being given consideration. Groups help older adults stay engaged, remain active and provide support. Most importantly it helps with staying connected to other individuals.

"Summer... when fireflies come out at dusk and ice melts too fast in lemonade; ice cream tastes better even though it's the same-old flavor"

– Nanette L. Avery