

Mayo Clinic Q & A - Dr. Gregory Poland - COVID-19 Update - 0...

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Halena Gazelka, Dr. Gregory Poland, Narrator

- N** Narrator 00:01
Coming up on Mayo Clinic Q&A, while key indicators are dropping and Omicron fear is fading, experts warn we're not out of the woods just yet. Plus, a look at recent research findings that could be cause for concern.
- D** Dr. Gregory Poland 00:15
The numbers are clearly dropping. However, 98% of U.S. states are still at high levels of transmission. So, when you hear numbers dropping it's not the same thing as, Okay, all clear, we can take off mass and not worry. We still have a lot of concern.
- D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 00:35
Welcome, everyone to Mayo Clinic Q&A. I'm your host, Dr. Halena Gazelka. We are recording this podcast on Monday, February the 14th, 2022. So, Happy Valentine's Day. Today Omicron numbers are declining, and mask mandates have come in and gone out. And yet we are still in the midst of a pandemic. We welcome Greg Poland back, our expert from Mayo Clinic, to give us our updates. Hi, Greg.
- D** Dr. Gregory Poland 01:06
Hi, Halena, and Happy Valentine's Day to you.
- D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:10
Happy Valentine's Day to you, Greg. I'm glad to see you wearing your pink today.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 01:14
I did and a little bit of red. It's the closest I had.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:17
That's wonderful. Well Greg, give us the latest updates on numbers. Are we trending in the right direction?

D Dr. Gregory Poland 01:25
Yeah, you know, it's a real encouragement. And I say this somewhat concerned that people will take it out of context. The numbers are clearly dropping. However, 98% of U.S. states are still at high levels of transmission. So, when you hear numbers dropping it's not the same thing as, Okay, all clear, we can take off masks and not worry. We still have a lot of concern. We still have about 110,000 people in the hospital. We're still having about 2,500 deaths a day, and we're still having about a quarter of a million new cases a day. So, this is not the time, I kind of think of it as, you know, if you're in a four-lap race, and we're on lap three why would you stop and declare victory? Finish the lap and then win.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:25
So, Greg if I might ask what numbers are improving? Those numbers sounded terrible.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 01:52
Well, so we were up at almost a million cases a day. Now we're down to a quarter of a million. So, hospitalizations just in the last week in the U.S. have fallen by 20%. So, both the acute indicators (number of cases), and the lagging indicators (hospitalizations), and then deaths after that are all dropping, slowly but surely dropping. So, if we can convince people hang on, keep wearing your mask, get vaccinated, get boosted if you haven't, I think we're going to get to a baseline level unless a new variant comes up.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 03:09
So, before that new variant comes up, we've talked before, Greg about COVID in the animal population at various times. Now I've read something about it in the deer population. Is that a concern?

D Dr. Gregory Poland 03:24
Yeah, we've talked a little bit about it in previous shows, and you're right. Sixteen states thus

far have tested and found COVID in their deer population and in something like 20 to 30% of the deer that they've tested. One deer in New York actually got infected, recovered, had evidence of re-infection. This is a major concern. The concern is that it will circulate in an animal population, then re-emerge, what's called a reverse zoonosis. We give it to animals, the virus mutates in animals, they have slightly different immune systems and then spread it back to humans in a form that our immune systems don't see well and are unprepared for. So, we are watching that extremely closely. It's unclear how the deer are getting infected. Probably the best theory is through an intermediary animal that humans are closer to dogs, cats, rodents, who knows. There's a lot of uncertainty around this, but it is something concerning.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 04:40

Greg is it known yet, there are many people who hunt, and we live in the upper Midwest, and so in Minnesota people do a lot of deer hunting and eat venison. Is it known if that is safe yet?

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Dr. Gregory Poland 04:53

No, you know, that kind of close contact with an unvaccinated hunter and an infected deer, nobody's proven that it's gone from deer to humans, but it's clearly gone from humans to deer, whether an intermediary or not. So, there is some concern there. There's no concern about eating properly cooked venison. It would be the contact with an infected animal.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 05:20

Tell us what's going on with vaccines for kiddos under five.

D

Dr. Gregory Poland 05:25

Oh, yes, this is very interesting. So, the thought was that the FDA was going to review the Pfizer data. So, this pertains to the Pfizer vaccine for those from six months up to five years of age. Myself and a couple of other people did interviews concerned about this. I think the New York Times published my interview. We had concerns that the data did not show efficacy and in terms of antibody levels that matched what was seen. What was being proposed is give two doses so that if a third dose was necessary, they would be primed and ready to go. My concern, and again, we have pushed even when people don't necessarily appreciate it for transparency and honesty in this. My concern was those data were not clear cut. And so, I urged waiting. And I think wisely, FDA took that approach and said, We will wait until there's third dose data, before we make that decision and review the vaccine. I think that's the right decision to make. It's not risk free, right? I mean, children will continue to get infected. But I think it's the right decision to first do no harm.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 06:52

So, any idea how long it will be before they have that next data?

D Dr. Gregory Poland 06:57

Yeah, I think the third dose data they are talking about sometime in the March, April, maybe as late as May, I don't think it'll be that late. And then from there a rolling submission to FDA to review those data. So, the idea would be, you know, before fall time for sure I think we will have a recommendation for kids going to preschool and kindergarten and things like that.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 07:26

Daycare.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 07:27

But, in the meantime, you know, I know that the public is weary of wearing a mask. I know they think it's over. It is not over. The worst thing that we could do would be to ignore these recommendations and never get this suppressed down and have to just keep living with this and having new variants arise. So, it is, whenever I'm in a public venue, I plead for people to wear their masks, protect themselves, and protect people around them.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 08:02

And it's so hard on the workforce too Greg. I've said before on the podcast that my little grandson who is two and can't get vaccinated yet, has been quarantined three or four times. Well, it happened again last week. And so, of course, his mother who's a nurse here has to be home, or his dad. Really difficult when the little ones all need to be quarantined.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 08:27

A lot of implications above and beyond health related to this.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 08:31

Yeah, tough. Well, there is also some research about other long-term effects of COVID, including on the heart. Tell us about that, Greg.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 08:41

Yeah. So, this is a really interesting study. It's a retrospective observational study. So, with all the provisos that go with that, they looked at a very large number, I think it was just under 300,000 veterans. And then they looked at about five and a half million veterans before COVID, and then another five and a half million veterans during COVID, but where they did not come for any COVID related, you know, diagnosis. And what they found really pretty much astounded the medical world. They found some 20 different cardiovascular diseases that were increased

anywhere from 50 to 70%, going out as long as a year. Now, what fits with that as we have cautioned and cautioned people that even though you might have survived, and this includes even mild COVID, that does not mean that you are not at risk for complications and for end organ damage. And so, they saw things like heart attack, stroke, pulmonary emboli which are blood clots to the lung, myocarditis, atrial fibrillation. I mean, these are potentially life changing diagnoses occurring for as long as a year out. And this occurred in elderly people, young, healthy people who had no risk factors. So, this is a serious finding, and people need to be aware of that in their decision making. The other thing that came out, a related study from Israel showed that people who got the vaccine reduced their risk, if they subsequently got infected, reduced their risk of long COVID and these kinds of symptoms by 50 to 60%. So, you know, what the data is showing as time goes on is you reduce your risk of serious illness, hospitalization, ventilation, and death. You reduce your risk of complications. You reduce your risk of long COVID. Now, you stack that up, all the benefits of getting the vaccine, you stack that up against the risks of getting the vaccine, which are measured in the handfuls per million. And so, again, there's no risk-free decision here. There is no risk-free decision. You are either going to get infected in time, or you're going to get vaccinated. And vaccination is clearly the safest choice.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 09:39

That's the word for the day, I think. Vaccination. And mask.

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Dr. Gregory Poland 11:30

And you know, really, when you when you think about this, when you think, Halena about the information you and I have tried to get out there for going on two years now, you are really, you know, I was sitting back and thinking what's at stake here? It is literally the health direction and the survival of humanity and human history. And yet people have been resistant to the data. They have operated on fear, on misinformation. And this is very sad for me and for you. As health educators, as physicians, we want people to be safe. We want to acknowledge there are risks in getting a vaccine, but those risks are tiny in comparison to the benefits and the risks of not getting vaccinated.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 12:26

Right and then keeping up on boosters too, correct?

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Dr. Gregory Poland 12:29

Absolutely. And, you know, maybe we should say because this is relatively recent information. You know, I'm talking about mRNA vaccines, now you get your two doses, you get a booster. For people who are immunocompromised, there's a recommendation for a fourth dose. So, they really get three, if you will, primary doses followed by a fourth booster dose. So, for people who are immunocompromised, moderately to severely immunocompromised, we want to emphasize it's not two and done. It's not three and done. It's four.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 13:06

Okay, and it seems like that keeps getting extended. So, who knows what it will be in five more months.

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Dr. Gregory Poland 13:13

On Friday, the CDC came out with a study, and I'll just briefly review this because it reinforces the need to continue wearing masks. And what they looked at is the efficacy of vaccine against outpatient visits and against hospitalization. So, if you got a booster, okay, the efficacy against symptomatic disease went after five months from 30% up to about 87-90%, somewhere in there. Four months after that booster that had fallen back down to 66%. So, 40% of people who got a booster after four months, if exposed, are still likely to get infected, granted mild or trivial, even asymptomatic infection, but still infected. For hospitalization, two months after that booster it maintained efficacy very well, 90 plus percent. And by four months it was still at 80%. So, again, not perfect, and it's a reason to continue wearing your masks and physical distancing, particularly indoors.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 14:33

So, Greg, any idea what's next in terms of variance? Now we're talking about Omicron that really had a surge, and now it seems to be declining. So, what's next?

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Dr. Gregory Poland 14:46

I think the things that are being watched the most are so-called Stealth Omicron, this is the BA.2 as opposed to Omicron, the BA.1, and then it's funny that they come up with these names, what is being called Deltacron, which has been detected now in the U.K., which is basically a combination of Delta and Omicron. So, you have all the severity of Delta with the extreme contagiousness of Omicron. So, that's not a good sign because remember that about 40% of the U.S. population is not yet vaccinated, a good part because they're not eligible yet for vaccinations. Even among people who are eligible for vaccination, about a third of them have not gotten vaccinated. And among those who got their first two doses of vaccine, half of them have not yet gotten a booster. So, we are still in a very, very vulnerable phase of this pandemic. And unfortunately, politicians and others are removing mask mandates which is a signal, an inappropriate signal, to the population of, Oh, it's over. We've heard it is mild. We've heard cases are decreasing, but there's always a variant waiting in the background. And as I've said before, we've watched this movie happen worldwide now five times. And I keep saying to myself, when are we going to learn? When are we going to learn?

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 16:24

Speaking of movies, Greg, I was smiling while you were talking because these Stealth Omicron, and Deltacron sound to me like a Star Wars or Transformers or something like that.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 16:35
That's how I know you have grandkids when you know about Transformers.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 16:40
Exactly. I have a few of those around my house that I step on sometimes. Well, any last words for us today, Greg?

D Dr. Gregory Poland 16:48
You know, I think I want to be optimistic here. On the one hand, we're really seeing cases and hospitalizations drop. We're seeing the very beneficial efficacy of these boosters in preventing severe disease, and moderate disease, and protecting babies in pregnant women. But the other side of that coin is getting that out to the public and getting them motivated to act on those data instead of continuing to suffer this. You know, since you and I last talked, another 15-20,000 Americans have died. And it need not be. How many more are going to die before we do our next broadcast together? And again, that is completely preventable. So, I urge people take advantage of what we now know after two years of data with masks, after over a year of data with vaccines, and take advantage of that, and protect yourself and your family.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 17:58
Show some love.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 18:00
There you go. Seriously, on Valentine's Day.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:04
Get vaccinated or boosted and wear a mask.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 18:07
Yeah, if you want to show love to your spouse, to your children, to your developing baby, to your community, your neighbor, get vaccinated. Wear a mask inside.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:20
Words of wisdom. Thank you, Greg for being here.

D Dr. Gregory Poland 18:22
My pleasure.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:24
Our thanks to Dr. Greg Poland, vaccine and virology expert at Mayo Clinic, for being here with us today to give us our COVID updates. I hope that you learned something. I know that I did. And we wish each of you a very wonderful Valentine's Day and every day.

N Narrator 18:41
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