

Clinician Update

Jan. 6, 2022

Virtua Health and Rowan University Have Affiliated

This week, Virtua Health and Rowan University shared the exciting news of their official affiliation, which will further distinguish South Jersey as a regional hub for innovation, research, and clinical discovery.

The partnership establishes the Virtua Health College of Medicine & Health Sciences of Rowan University, which will encompass the state's largest medical school, an expanded nursing and allied health professions school, a new school of translational biometric engineering and sciences, multiple new research institutes, and more.

"There has never been a more defining moment for our two respected organizations to come together to transform and reimagine the future of health care and the health care workforce than right now," said Dennis W. Pullin, FACHE, president and CEO of Virtua Health. "This affiliation will further strengthen our relationship with Rowan so that we can innovate around the training of tomorrow's physicians and health professionals and the critical research that will impact the future of health care in this community. I am excited about the purposeful things that we will do together and the lasting, here-for-good impact our efforts will have in New Jersey and beyond."

Virtua and Rowan share an overarching commitment to creating a series of meaningful opportunities to:

- Improve the health of New Jersey residents
- Educate and train the state's next generation of physicians, nurses, and allied health professionals
- Innovate by creating and testing new therapies, treatments, and models of care
- Increase health equity by meeting the needs of the underserved in the community

To learn more about this major news and the way it will benefit the region, please consult the [media release](#) detailing the partnership between Virtua and Rowan.

You can also read news reports from [Becker's Hospital Review](#), the [Burlington County Times](#), and an interview with Dennis Pullin in [ROI-NJ](#).

In Case You Missed It: 2022 Coronavirus Surge Update for Clinicians

Virtua senior leaders [held a webinar last evening](#) detailing the latest information on our system's response to this recent COVID-19 surge that has created unprecedented demands across Virtua Health and our community at large. The meeting, hosted by Executive VP and Chief Clinical Officer Dr. Reg Blaber, covered many important topics such as testing, staffing, vaccination, and treatment.

- **Senior VP and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Jennifer Khelil** presented on the "state of the house," providing the latest numbers of cases in our hospitals as well as among our colleagues.
- **Infection Prevention Officer Dr. Martin Topiel** gave an update on the omicron variant, as well as the latest information on monoclonal antibody and emerging treatments.
- **VP Clinical Surgical Practice & Outcomes Dr. Howard J. Winter** discussed the surgical case rescheduling plan, highlighting that for the next two weeks, we are postponing all invasive procedures at all five Virtua acute-care hospitals except for emergencies and urgent cases

(defined as situations in which a two-week delay would cause significant harm). In addition, Dr. Winter provided a [useful link from the American College of Surgeons on elective case triage guidelines](#).

- **SVP and Chief Nursing Officer Cathy Hughes, MSN, MHA, RN, NEA-BC**, shared the nursing plan for how the organization is addressing staffing with the increase in census and colleague illness challenges.
- **VP for Medical Affairs Dr. Christopher Pomrink** presented on COVID surge strategy, outlining the plans for ED admissions, the new temporary process for admissions, and daily rounding.
- **VP for CIN Operations and VIN President Donna Antenucci, RN, BSN**, detailed the success of Virtua’s remote patient monitoring program (RPM) with now over 1,000 patients who have participated in the program. The average age of program participants is 77—tempering any concerns over the ability of patients to take advantage of the technology.
- **VP of VMG Clinical Operations Dr. Sam Weiner** shared the latest information on Virtua’s COVID testing program, including the recent opening of scheduled testing at the HEC. Dr. Weiner also shared details on the vaccination mega-site in the former A.C. Moore store on Nixon Drive in Mount Laurel.

Each of the speakers reinforced the critical importance of booster vaccinations as a key tool in helping to stave off the most serious effects of COVID-19. (See article further below on “Five Reasons to Receive a Booster Shot.” [The webinar link can be found here](#).)

Five Reasons to Receive a COVID-19 Booster Shot

One message that has emerged in recent weeks: Booster vaccinations for COVID-19 help to mitigate the effects of the virus. Booster shots are recommended at five months after the completion of the primary series of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, according to the CDC. The booster interval recommendation for people who received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine (two months) or the Moderna vaccine (six months) has not changed. Click to [view the recommendation](#).

Here are five reasons to get a booster shot. (Please share with colleagues, patients, and family.)

1. Boosters add protection. Although COVID-19 vaccines remain effective in preventing severe disease, [recent data](#) suggest their effectiveness at preventing infection or severe illness wanes over time, especially in people ages 65 years and older.

The recent emergence of the omicron variant further emphasizes the importance of vaccination, boosters, and prevention efforts needed to protect against COVID-19. Data from clinical trials showed that a booster shot increased the immune response in trial participants who finished a Pfizer or Moderna primary series six months earlier or who received a Johnson & Johnson single-dose vaccine two months earlier.

“Booster shots have demonstrated the ability to safely increase people’s protection against infection and severe outcomes and are an important public health tool to strengthen our defenses against the virus,” said CDC director [Rochelle Walensky](#).

2. Vaccines and boosters protect against serious infection. Breakthrough infections are becoming more common due to omicron, but those cases rarely land someone in the hospital, or worse, a critical or intensive care unit.

[Vaccines reduce the risk of severe illness and death among people who are fully vaccinated.](#) In addition to data from clinical trials, evidence from real-world vaccine effectiveness studies show that COVID-19 vaccines help protect against COVID-19 infections, with or without symptoms (asymptomatic infections).

Vaccine effectiveness against hospitalizations has remained relatively high over time, although it tends to be slightly lower for [older adults](#) and for people with weakened immune systems.

3. Prior infection does not offer good protection. The antibodies provided by a prior COVID-19 infection have never been considered as good as the antibodies provided by a vaccine, but omicron's new spike proteins make that clearer.

Omicron's aggressive spike proteins are better at getting past both natural immunity and vaccines, [studies show](#). Omicron presents a strong risk of reinfection, but the risk can be significantly reduced by getting vaccinated and boosted.

4. Booster side effects are generally the same. [Booster shot side effects](#) reported so far are similar to those of the initial COVID-19 vaccine series, or milder depending on the recipient. Pain, redness, or swelling at the injection site, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, fever, and nausea are the most commonly reported booster side effects so far.

Booster shots have the same formulations, or ingredients, as the primary COVID-19 vaccine series. The dosage also remains the same for the Pfizer and J&J boosters as for their initial vaccines. However, dosage is different for the Moderna booster vaccine—it's half the dose of the Moderna primary series.

5. It's easy and more convenient to get your booster. If anything, getting your booster shot may feel more routine than receiving the initial vaccination series, with availability at your local pharmacy, health care provider, or vaccine mega-site.

- To make an appointment at the Burlington County COVID-19 Vaccine Mega-Site in Mount Laurel, visit virtua.org/vaccine. The mega-site is open Tuesdays through Saturdays.
- To find other vaccination sites and book an appointment online, consult the State of New Jersey's vaccine locator at <https://covid19.nj.gov/pages/finder>.
- **Note:** For colleagues who receive their booster outside of Virtua, please submit verification via email to covidvaccinedocumentation@virtua.org. Please include your employee ID number and photo of the CDC COVID-19 Vaccination Record Card.

Online Tool Determines Need for Colleague COVID-19 Testing

Today, Virtua introduces [a new online tool](#) to support colleagues who may require testing for COVID-19. Starting now, any colleague who has active symptoms consistent with COVID-19 or a known exposure to a COVID-positive person can complete an online form and receive guidance on what steps to take next.

The aim of the tool is to appropriately triage colleagues and give clear direction on whether they should pursue COVID testing based on symptoms, the nature of an exposure, and other considerations.

This will reduce the volume of calls to the COVID-19 Employee Hotline, which has experienced record-setting on-hold times in recent weeks.

Importantly: This online tool is for Virtua colleagues only, and is critical to our ability to determine when someone should seek COVID testing and call out of work.

Because of the tool, **colleagues no longer need to call the Employee Hotline and speak to the Triage Team upon developing COVID-like symptoms.** Please utilize the tool and follow the directives it provides.

Colleagues with family members who may be eligible for COVID testing should consider [community testing offered by Virtua](#) or the State of New Jersey's [Test Site Finder](#).

[Click here](#) to access the tool. You will also find a link on the [Coronavirus Resource Center](#) on the Virtua VINE.

CDC Recommends Boosters for Kids Age 12 and Up

On Wednesday night, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended booster doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine for kids age 12 to 15—at least five months after their second shot.

Note: The five-month interval between an initial series of mRNA vaccine and a booster applies to adults as well as the newly booster-eligible children ages 12 to 15. This is one month shorter than the previous six-month recommendation.

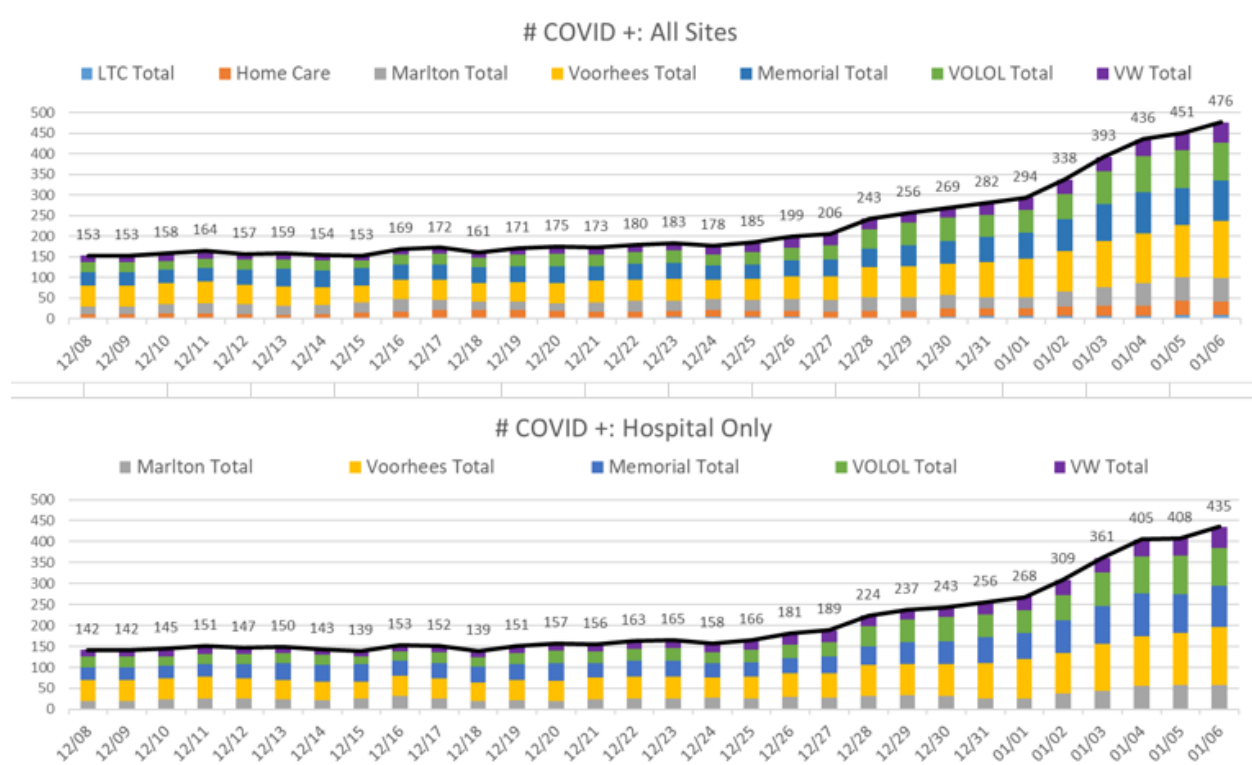
The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized the boosters on Monday, paving the way for CDC's final green light. The CDC panel of experts voted to recommend them after reviewing data on Wednesday. The final signoff from CDC director Dr. Rochelle Walensky came a few hours later.

"It is critical that we protect our children and teens from COVID-19 infection and the complications of severe disease," said Dr. Walensky. "I endorsed ACIP's vote to expand eligibility and strengthen our recommendations for booster doses. We now recommend that all adolescents aged 12 to 17 years should receive a booster shot five months after their primary series. This booster dose will provide optimized protection against COVID-19 and the omicron variant. I encourage all parents to keep their children up to date with CDC's COVID-19 vaccine recommendations."

The Burlington County COVID-19 Vaccine Mega-Site in Mount Laurel began administering booster doses to kids age 12 and up today.

To make an appointment at the Burlington County COVID-19 Vaccine Mega-Site in Mount Laurel, visit virtua.org/vaccine. The mega-site is open Tuesdays through Saturdays. Remember to bring your child's vaccination card with you to the appointment.

COVID-19 Census



Latest COVID-19 Fast Facts

- The rate of transmission in New Jersey is 1.69.
- The total number of cases are as follows:
 - Burlington County: 64,295 cases
 - Camden County: 80,048 cases
 - Gloucester County: 43,283 cases
- COVID-associated mortality for Camden, Burlington, and Gloucester counties: 3,111.
- The state’s Vaccination Overview dashboard reported 15,398,352 doses of vaccine have been administered.

Radiofrequency Ablation Treats Thyroid Nodules without Surgery

Virtua is now offering radiofrequency ablation (RFA) for the treatment of large, benign thyroid nodules. Historically, treatment for these nodules involved lobectomy, with some patients requiring hormone supplementation.

“Patients may not necessarily want to have surgery for a benign nodule and don’t want the possibility of having to take thyroid medication,” said Virtua endocrinologist Jean Davidson, DO. “Through this new procedure, we are able to shrink the nodule and relieve cosmetic and compressive concerns without the risks of surgery and without the need for medication.”

Candidates for thyroid RFA will have a benign nodule (confirmed twice by needle biopsy) that is at least 3 centimeters in size. The procedure is performed under local anesthesia, with the option of patients receiving additional medication to help them feel comfortable. A thin needle is inserted percutaneously and guided via ultrasound to the nodule. The tip of the needle heats up, ablating the nodule. Surrounding tissue is not affected, preserving gland function.

The ablated nodule turns into scar tissue, shrinking over time. The procedure is performed in the doctor's office. Patients are able to resume normal activities later in the day.

While RFA for benign thyroid nodules received U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval in 2018, it may not be covered by your medical insurance. The Virtua team will discuss with patients out-of-pocket costs. To refer a patient, call 856-247-7220.

***Gastroenterology Today* Now Posted to Digital 411**

Our library of publications for and about Virtua clinicians has a home base on [Digital 411](#), found under "[Additional Resources/Clinician Publications](#)." There, you can find archived copies of *Clinician Update*, as well as a growing newsletter series focused on Virtua's specialty services. Our most recent issue, [Gastroenterology Today](#), features Virtua's use of less-invasive treatment for inflammatory pancreatic cysts. New stenting technology is now making endoscopic treatment an easier and a preferred approach to resolving pancreatic pseudocysts. The issue also features a case that illustrates the benefits of screening for Barrett's esophagus and esophageal cancer.

VOTE: 2022 Top Docs for Kids

It's that time of the year when *SJ Magazine* asks South Jersey doctors to nominate colleagues for their "Top Docs for Kids" issue. There are many colleagues amongst us who are exemplars in pediatric medicine, and this is an opportunity to give them some recognition. Please complete the [physician's ballot here](#) by using this question as a guide: "If your child was ill, who would you send them to?" A physician license number is required. Voting ends Feb. 1, with the results posted in March. [Patients can also poll here](#). And, if you'd like to see last year's "Top Docs for Kids," [click here](#).

Separately, looking ahead, the *SJ Magazine* 2022 "Top Docs" distinction will be on the ballot in April. That poll will honor physicians chosen by their peers—and patients—and will be published in September. More details on that when the polling opens. To see last year's list, [click here](#).