

Clinician Update August 5, 2021

Take the “Hospital at Home” Survey

Virtua Health is exploring how the “Hospital at Home” model may benefit patients and clinicians in our community. With this short (less than 5 minute) survey, we’d appreciate your feedback on this initiative which is being adopted at some of the nation’s most respected health systems. Your feedback is essential to make sure we get it right. Please weigh in [here](#); a short time well spent for you and your patients.

New Hospital Visitation Guidelines: Effective Today, Aug. 5, 2021

Due to recent developments related to the COVID-19 virus, Virtua has updated its hospital visitation protocols in order to protect the health and safety of our patients, their families, and our staff. **General visitation is currently limited to one designated visitor per patient for the duration of the patient’s time at the hospital.** In certain circumstances, it may be possible to designate an alternate visitor. **We request that visits are limited to no more than two hours.** General visiting hours are 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. at all Virtua hospitals.

Virtua Health strongly encourages all visitors to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Important Requirements for our Visitors:

- **Facemasks and other appropriate Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) are required for all visitors in all areas of our facilities.**
- Visitors must sanitize their hands often so to protect their loved one and our staff.
- Visitors must participate in temperature checks and COVID-19 screening protocols administered by our staff prior to entering the facility.
- If visiting a patient in a semi-private room, if both beds are occupied, the visitor must draw the curtain between the beds and keep his/her mask on at all times.
- Visitors must be 18 years or older.
- **Visitors who do not satisfy these requirements, or who show signs of illness – even mild sickness, such as coughing and/or cold-like symptoms – will be required to leave.**

Because the Delta variant is more transmissible than previous strains of COVID-19, visitors are asked not to eat or drink in patient rooms or in the cafeteria. We encourage visitors to eat before or after their visit to the hospital to minimize the need to remove masks.

Additional limitations/exceptions related to the above requirements may be considered depending on the circumstances and will be determined on a case-by-case basis. With limited exceptions, **Visitors are currently restricted from Virtua emergency departments.**

For a list of department-specific visitation guidelines —including those for same-day surgery, labor and delivery, NICU, and more—please click [here](#).

Pre-Op Testing Update: Action Required for VMG and VIN Practices

New information from the CDC makes it clear that people who have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 may still become infected with the virus, especially the more virulent Delta variant.

Thankfully, at the present time, these infections are usually mild or asymptomatic. More worrisome is

the news that those vaccinated people who contract the Delta variant can then pass it on to others, both vaccinated and unvaccinated. The unvaccinated who contract the Delta variant are at risk for severe symptoms, hospitalization, and death.

Based on this new information, Virtua has reinstated testing of ALL patients admitted through the emergency departments. Additionally, pre-procedure COVID-19 testing is required for the following patients:

- **All unvaccinated patients**
- **Vaccinated patients whose procedures will require them to be in a hospital bed at least one night**
- **Patients who have had documented COVID-19 infections within 90 days of their procedures and whose procedures will require them to be in a hospital bed at least one night**

This will go into effect on **Monday, Aug. 9** for surgeries and procedures scheduled on or after **Thursday, Aug. 12**. Operationally, it means the following:

1. All patients who meet the above criteria for testing should have COVID-19 testing scheduled for three days prior to their procedures.
2. Testing should be scheduled in the same way it is now, at our Virtua Camden, Virtua (Memorial) Mount Holly, and Virtua Voorhees locations.
3. VMG practices can schedule testing themselves.
4. Non-VMG practices should schedule testing using the scheduling link or by calling the testing center number, as before.
5. Patients who have been scheduled for their procedures and meet the criteria for testing should be contacted to schedule the testing. This will mean checking your upcoming schedules and arranging testing for appropriate patients.
6. **Patients may be under the impression that they do not need testing if they have been vaccinated. Please explain to them that Virtua's criteria for testing has changed due to our increasing knowledge of the virulence of the Delta variant and that testing is a requirement.**
7. Rapid testing is available for patients who need scheduled procedures with less than three days' notice, as before.

Thank you all for continuing to keep our patients and colleagues safe.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION: Organizational Update on Face Masks from Dr. John Matsinger

In light of the increased COVID-19 activity in the region and the widespread nature of the Delta variant, the decision has been made to update our mask protocols for non-clinical areas. Regardless of vaccination status, **everyone will now be required to wear a mask upon entering any Virtua Health non-clinical building**. The mask requirements in the clinical areas remain unchanged at this time and all present practices and protocols will remain in place.

COVID-19 Q&A with Dr. Martin Topiel: Delta Variant

We encourage you to share the following answers to commonly asked questions about the COVID-19 Delta variant with your team, family, and friends and encourage everyone to make smart, safety-minded decisions.

How is the Delta variant different from “regular” COVID-19?

The CDC has openly stated that this is a “different infection” compared to the previous strains of COVID-19 and needs to be thought of and handled differently. There are two important things to note: Delta is extremely contagious – much more than the previous strains – and it is most often more severe among unvaccinated people.

First, let’s talk about how contagious it is. I’ve read estimates that, on average, one infected person will infect eight to 10 others. Those eight to 10 people would then go on to infect eight to 10 more people—it’s easy to see how it has spread so quickly and emerged as such a threat.

In regards to symptoms, we are still learning, but the data available so far indicates that unvaccinated people who contract the Delta variant are, generally, sicker than those who had earlier strains of COVID-19.

Do vaccinated people need to be concerned?

Everyone needs to take this seriously. The COVID-19 vaccines have, essentially, been a miracle in how well they protect against COVID-19. And yet, the Delta variant is resulting in more “breakthrough” cases among fully vaccinated people. It may not be a giant number when you think of how many millions of people are vaccinated, but it’s very real when it happens to you or someone you love.

The good news is that, for the most part, these are mild to moderate cases, and that vaccinated people are not getting ill to the extent of requiring hospitalization. What’s tricky is that a vaccinated person may acquire the Delta variant, feel perfectly fine, and inadvertently shed the virus to many others, including unvaccinated or vulnerable individuals who could become severely ill or worse.

What impact is Delta having in New Jersey specifically?

The Northeast is not experiencing the same surge as other parts of the country, notably the South. This is, without question, due to the relatively high vaccination rates in states like New Jersey and its neighbors.

Still, the numbers are going up again, particularly in Burlington County, and right here at Virtua’s hospitals. In fact, some of our own colleagues have become ill because of the Delta variant.

How can we protect ourselves and others while at work?

We must not allow the fatigue and frustration of the past year-and-a-half allow us to put down our guard. Because of the contagiousness of the Delta variant, we must be extra mindful and vigilant about our protocols. For instance, taking off our masks for a quick chat in the breakroom or other small spaces with limited ventilation is not a good idea. These are high-risk areas for transmission, even when asymptomatic. Eating lunch outside is preferable to eating lunch inside. In all patient-facing encounters we must, of course, be purposeful and deliberate in terms of proper use of masks, goggles, and other forms of protective personal equipment (PPE)—as emphasized by CDC and OSHA.

Should vaccinated people change their behaviors at home and in public?

I know it’s tough news to take, but I would recommend people return to earlier habits around social distancing and mask-wearing. This is especially true if they have compromised immunity or interact with someone who is at greater risk. The weather is nice this time of year, so I recommend people interact with friends and loved ones outside, whenever possible, and to keep those gatherings small.

What should parents of children too young for vaccination do?

Parents of young children are in a difficult position, especially with schools reopening in the fall. Children are developing illness and requiring hospital care to a much larger degree than they had been previously. That is why the national pediatric associations all recommend children ages 2 and older wear masks when indoors at public spaces. It's also possible for children to be carriers of the virus to others.

In the short term, I would talk to the parents of your children's friends and see if you are on the same page when it comes to vaccinations. This doesn't need to be a confrontation, simply a conversation. Since children cannot currently be vaccinated, I think parents should try to ensure that their children primarily interact with adults who are vaccinated.

If I feel mildly sick—a summer cold or allergies—what should I do?

I would recommend you take those manageable, minor illnesses more seriously now than you might have in 2019 or earlier. Even something you would typically dismiss as a cold or runny nose should be given extra consideration as possibly COVID. We are seeing vaccinated people with COVID in the outpatient setting because of Delta.

We can't be too careful, and so the smart thing to do is to stay home until you are well and minimize your interactions with others, even in your household. For the safety of your colleagues and patients, please do not report to work if you are unwell, even mildly. If you have certain symptoms and need to miss work, let the colleague health team know so they can make recommendations.

How does a person know if they have the regular strain of COVID or the Delta variant?

They might not know, as that information is not readily available. The viral tests that are widely available are used to determine *if* you have COVID, not what kind of COVID it might be. That requires a special test called genomic sequencing.

Some of the current data suggests that around 85 percent of the current strains are of the Delta variant. Given that—and how contagious Delta is—err on the side of caution and monitor your health and systems closely.

Will the Delta variant dissipate?

That is not an easy question to answer. A virus, by its nature, will continue to mutate. In many cases, it will adapt to become more resistant to vaccines and our other safety measures. So not only will the Delta variant continue to spread so long as there are hosts to acquire it, but there will most certainly be additional variants in the future if we don't put an end to COVID-19.

What is your takeaway message?

First and foremost, **if you are not vaccinated yet, do not wait another day. Even though Virtua's mandatory vaccine policy does not take effect for another few weeks, leaving yourself vulnerable between now and then is a dangerous thing to do.**

For those who are vaccinated, do not panic. You are well-protected, but will need to exercise a bit more caution than before. It's frustrating that the rules and recommendations always seem to be changing, but that is the reality of this time period. Please wear a mask – at work and when out in the community—to demonstrate safety-minded behavior.

For additional information about COVID-19 and the COVID-19 vaccine, please visit the [VINE](#).

Remember: In order to meet the deadline of being fully vaccinated by **Wednesday, Sept. 15**, colleagues must receive a first dose of the Pfizer vaccine no later than **Wednesday, Aug. 25**. Those who want the Moderna vaccine will need a first dose even earlier, by **Wednesday, Aug. 18**.

Colleagues are welcome to receive the vaccine at a non-Virtua location—such as a store or pharmacy—and submit documentation/proof to covidvaccinedocumentation@virtua.org.

Catch Dr. Jennifer Khelil's Interview with the Inquirer's Instagram Live

Earlier this week, Virtua's Dr. Jennifer Khelil, chief medical officer, participated in a 30-minute live interview on the [Philadelphia Inquirer's](#) Instagram. In the discussion, Dr. Khelil answers many common questions about the Delta variant and what it means for vaccinated and unvaccinated people in our community. Watch here: <https://bit.ly/3jrt6XE>

Updated: Colleague COVID-19 Hotline

For the continued safety of our patients, colleagues, and the community, all colleagues must call the colleague COVID-19 hotline, 609-444-2828, under any of the following circumstances:

- If you test positive for COVID-19
- If anyone in your household is positive for COVID-19
- If you have been in close contact (within 6 feet for longer than 10 minutes) with someone who has tested positive (community exposure)
- If you develop any of the COVID-19 symptoms below, and the symptoms are not explained by another known diagnosis:
 - Fever of greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit
 - Loss of taste or smell
 - Cough
 - Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
 - Sinus-type or allergy-type symptoms (common Delta presentation in the vaccinated)
 - Aches or pains
 - Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
- Anyone in your household develops COVID-19 symptoms as described above (whether or not they plan to be tested)
- Anyone in your household has been exposed (within 6 feet for longer than 10 minutes) to a known positive case
- If you have been quarantined and you develop symptoms
- If you have been quarantined and you are ready to return to work (ask for the Return to Work team)
- If you return from international travel

Remember: Colleagues who believe they may have been exposed in the community should call the colleague hotline. Colleagues who believe they may have been exposed at work should speak with their direct leader. If a colleague calls the hotline regarding a potential work exposure, the colleague will be directed back to their leader, who will partner with infection prevention to investigate potential work exposures.

The COVID Triage Team is available Monday through Thursday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday voice mails will be returned during morning hours.

Thank you for your continued dedication to safety.

Latest COVID-19 Fast Facts

- The state's COVID-19 dashboard encountered some problems today so we were unable to provide our usual run-down of case numbers per county and three-county mortality. We expect they will be back up next week for our next issue.
- COVID-19 cases in New Jersey spiked to their highest 1-day total in three months with a reported 1,345 today. The number of coronavirus patients hospitalized statewide is 599, the most since May 26.
- The rate of transmission in New Jersey is now 1.37.
- The state's Vaccination Overview dashboard reports 10,563,520 doses of vaccine have been administered. About 4 million people in the state remain unvaccinated, including children under the age of 12, who are not yet eligible.

Cardiopulmonary Rehab Services for Your Patients

Although an important part of the recovery process, cardiac rehabilitation is an underutilized service across the country. Virtua's comprehensive Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation Program, comprised of specialized cardiac and pulmonary rehab services, including now one specialized to peripheral artery disease (PAD), is designed to help your patients rebuild strength, increase mobility, and relieve symptoms. Conveniently located across Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester counties, these services provide carefully monitored exercises and education for your patients, with customized plans based on their condition and capabilities.

To order through Epic, choose "Ambulatory Referral" then select the specific type of cardiopulmonary rehab that's required. For more information on the programs, eligibility, and locations, visit [Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation](#)

Proton Therapy Center Construction Update



This fall, we anticipate a major milestone in the construction of the Penn Medicine | Virtua Health Proton Therapy Center with the upcoming arrival of its 90-ton cyclotron. Construction is well underway at the Virtua Voorhees campus, with an expected open date of fall 2022. When complete, it will be the only proton therapy center in South Jersey. The center will provide access to the most advanced radiation treatment to precisely target certain cancers, offering new hope for recovery and improved quality of life. You can find more information about the Proton Therapy Center at virtua.org/PennProton.

Introducing Virtua GI and Digestive Health

Virtua has initiated a new campaign focused on the recently renamed [Virtua GI and Digestive Health](#) program. Now offering more than more than 50 Virtua gastroenterologists in 20 locations throughout Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester counties, Virtua can connect patients to advanced diagnostics, treatments, and interventions from a multi-disciplinary team of specialists including interventional gastroenterologists, hepatologists, colorectal surgeons, thoracic surgeons, oncologists, and dietitians for nutrition therapy. Click to learn more about [Virtua GI and Digestive Health](#) or our expanded [Gastroenterology](#) program.