

Clinician Update

September 21, 2023

[The Latest Info on COVID-19: Strains, Boosters, and More](#)

Cases of COVID-19 are on the rise across the country. Here is what you need to know from Martin Topiel, MD, Virtua chief infection control officer.

It is becoming so difficult to keep track of COVID strains. What is the most prevalent one presently?

EG.5 is still the most predominant strain, representing 25% of isolates tested. There is also concern of variant BA.2.86, a highly mutated Omicron variant (with 30 mutations). It appears, however, that present vaccines and antibodies still protect against this potential change in strain. Fortunately, there has been a relatively small uptick in these cases and most people seem to experience only mild symptoms with it to date.

Should we take new or enhanced precautions because of this strain?

Get the updated COVID-19 vaccine (2023-2024 formula, released in September 2023) if you haven't already. This certainly applies to patients who are immunocompromised or 65 and older—but also to all who come in contact or reside with people at higher risk.

This vaccine was developed from the recent Omicron XBB.1.5 strain and is designed to protect against recent Omicron variants. Studies have shown that antibodies generated to the XBB.1.5 variant cross-react well with the EG.5 variant as well as the mutated strain. This will help safeguard people's health—particularly with Halloween, Thanksgiving, and other holiday gatherings on the horizon.

Who is eligible for the new booster?

Most people six months and older can receive the new vaccine. No further, additional boosting is necessary if this is your first “shot,” which is great to note for first timers.

Unless you have received a booster in the past 60 days, or you contracted COVID in the past two months, you are likely eligible. If you have big travel plans or can anticipate other occasions that might increase your risk profile (weddings, concerts, etc.), you should be even more mindful of taking precautions.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) can help you stay up to date on vaccine recommendations for all age groups.

Is the vaccine still free through emergency programs?

Yes, the good news is that it remains free to all. The updated COVID vaccine is free for most Americans through private health insurance and Medicare. Individuals who are uninsured and underinsured can receive free COVID vaccines at local health centers, pharmacies, and health care providers through the [Bridge Access Program](#).

How do we protect ourselves and our loved ones from other respiratory illnesses this fall?

Respiratory virus season, which includes COVID-19, flu, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), arrives this time of year, so now is an excellent time to take proactive, preventive measures. Get your flu shot and updated COVID-19 vaccine.

If you're age 60 or older, you should also consider getting the newly available [RSV vaccine](#). The RSV vaccine helps protect older adults from severe respiratory illness caused by this highly contagious virus.

TeamBirth NJ Launches at Virtua Mount Holly Hospital

A third Virtua site now uses TeamBirth NJ, a national model that improves birth outcomes. Virtua Mount Holly Hospital this week celebrated the launch of the program, which improves communication between patients and providers, and supports health equity. Virtua Voorhees Hospital and the Virtua Midwifery Birth & Wellness Center have used the program for about a year.

“TeamBirth invites the patient and their support person to play an active role in shared decision-making,” said Michelle Salvatore, MD, an OB-GYN with Virtua Health. “We want them to feel empowered and a sense of agency during this hugely important milestone.”

A principal component of TeamBirth is a whiteboard (called a planning board) located in all labor and delivery rooms. The board outlines care plans and progress for the patient and serves as an ongoing, shared reference for the Virtua clinicians. The full care team, which includes the person giving birth and their support person, meets frequently in dedicated “huddles” to make sure all parties are informed and engaged. The huddles provide patients with an opportunity to voice their emotions, opinions, and concerns in a respectful, encouraging environment.

To learn more, click [here](#).

Health Care on Wheels: Community Groups Tour Unique Mobile Health Fleet

This week, Virtua Health showcased its award-winning fleet of mobile health vehicles—including the brand new, traveling cancer screening unit, plus the mobile grocery store, farmers market, and pediatric services unit. Also on display during the event at the Virtua Health & Wellness Center – Camden was high-tech emergency response and patient transport units. Community members climbed aboard these specialized vehicles and learned how Virtua is building healthier communities.

“Virtua’s innovative mobile fleet is a game-changer for people across South Jersey,” said Sarah Fawcett-Lee, SVP and chief philanthropy officer. “By bringing services directly into communities, many more people are able to get the care they need and deserve. We thank our generous donors, who make these life-changing programs possible.”

We Support Nominations

[WE Support](#) is looking for *Physician* and *Clinician* peer supporter nominations. The peer support program creates a space for colleagues to seek emotional support from a trained peer who has a shared experience working in health care and who can empathize with their experiences and stressors. To apply to become a peer supporter or nominate a colleague, complete the [Peer Supporter Nomination form](#). Email Caitlyn Van Wagner at cvanwagner@virtua.org if you have additional questions or need more information.

Virtua in the News

Virtua CEO Wins National Innovation Award

Modern Healthcare, a leading industry magazine, has named Dennis Pullin among its 25 “Top Innovators for 2023.” Virtua’s president and CEO received the prestigious honor for our groundbreaking mobile health programs and proton therapy center, among other initiatives. Read the *Modern Healthcare* [article](#) and [profile, ROI-NJ](#), and the [Philadelphia Business Journal](#).

Virtua/Rowan Leader Named to ‘Power 50’ List

A statewide business publication has recognized Thomas Cavalieri, DO, on its 2023 Education Power 50 list. Dr. Cavalieri is senior vice provost for the [Virtua Health College of Medicine & Life Sciences of Rowan University](#). Read in [NJ Biz](#).

Virtua Chief Clinical Officer Honored as a Veteran in Business

The *Philadelphia Business Journal* has named Reg Blaber, MD, EVP and chief clinical officer, as one of the region’s Veterans in Business. The program recognizes individuals who served in the U.S. Armed Forces before making their mark on Greater Philadelphia's business community. Dr. Blaber served the United States Army, rising to the rank of major. He was an internist at the Martin Army Community Hospital at Fort Benning in Georgia. During his time in the Army, he was also stationed at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Fort Meade, both in Maryland. [Read more](#).

Virtua Voorhees Holds First NICU Reunion in 5 Years

NICU family members celebrated and showed their gratitude to the staff at a special reunion—the first since before COVID. The heartwarming event brought together children and families who received care in the neonatal intensive care unit at Virtua Voorhees Hospital and special care nursery at Virtua Mount Holly Hospital. Watch on [6 ABC](#) (live and online), [6 ABC \(extended story\)](#), and [PHL 17](#).

Virtua Nursing Leader Cited as a Top CNO

A national industry publication has named Cathy Hughes, SVP and CNO, to its 2023 list of “Chief Nursing Officers to Know.” Read in [Becker’s Hospital Review](#).

Virtua Physician Explains How Tech Can Address Industry Challenges

Tarun Kapoor, MD, MBA, SVP and chief Digital transformation officer was among 51 leaders who discussed how technology can improve health care delivery and reduce financial strain on health systems. Dr. Kapoor shared his insights in [Becker's Hospital Review](#).

Practicing Excellence at Virtua

Speaking of Dr. Kapoor, he has shared this feedback regarding our shared Practicing Excellence journey:

“What I find encouraging about this journey we are sharing, it’s the sharing part. All of us at Virtua, no matter our roles, even if not patient-facing, we are called to excellence. What is really admirable is how we all have this within us, the excellence we hone. And system wide, this brings forth our best in whatever we do.”

This week, we invite you to focus on the invaluable insights provided in the [Week 25 and 26 guides](#). Topics include *Sending Home, Knowing your Flow, Discharge, Sending Home, Finishing Strong, and Conveying Compassion*.

It is no surprise that conveying compassion is a common reference among our clinician reviews. Note the following recent examples and how the patient felt about the experience, and the clinician referenced:

- “Always a pleasure seeing him. He’s very thorough & made me feel very comfortable.” (Alexander Au, MD)
- “She is kind, respectful, intelligent, and very thorough. She answers any question that you have truthfully, and she is always available to help. She is a great doctor.” (Jasmine Bajaj, MD)
- “I feel safe in his care.” (Ashok K. Keswani, MD)

Thank you for your commitment to Practicing Excellence and the Patient Experience journey. We welcome your feedback. Email your thoughts to VirtuaClinician@virtua.org.

Sharing the Language of Caring

Earlier this year, Virtua introduced the [Language of Caring Guide](#), which was designed to help our colleagues use patient-centered language that encourages empathy and inclusivity in all interactions.

For instance, the guide acknowledges how common it is in health care to fall into clichés and refer to fighting or waging war on a certain disease. While we respect these attitudes, it can cause a person to feel as though they are not living up to the expectations of their family and friends to “fight” harder or be a “warrior.”

Language that evokes healing and hope, as opposed to conflict, is often warmly received.

You can read more about the concept in the chapter of the [Language of Caring Guide](#) called “Violent Language.”

Assistant nurse manager Miranda Konstantinides shared this feedback, stating, "It may not be easy at first, but the guide provided many good examples. We've posted a copy on our team's bulletin board and put it into practice. This has led to better patient-staff interaction. It's a win-win for sure."

Heart Team Has Fun Time Together at Topgolf

It was a fun night out recently at Topgolf in Mount Laurel for the Virtua cardiothoracic surgical team, along with clinical and interventional cardiologists, electrophysiology cardiologists, the advanced heart failure team, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and Virtua leaders.

“We are one team, one vision, with exceptional patient care,” said Chun “Dan” Choi, MD, vice president of clinical operations for cardiothoracic surgery at Virtua. “A night like this enabled us to enjoy special time together. What a fun group!”

Click to view photos on Virtua's [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#) pages.

Here for Good Podcast Presents: *Chef Jose Garces and his “Philosophy on Food”*

Tune in for a [conversation with Chef Jose Garces](#). Many people know Garces as a winner of the Food Network series “Next Iron Chef,” but he holds other meaningful titles, including restaurateur, James Beard Award winner, farmer, and father.

On the podcast, Garces talks about his philosophy around food and the importance it has on people's lives—both in health and culture. He shares stories from filming “Next Iron Chef,” his goals as a member of President Biden's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition, and how the pandemic impacted the restaurant business and food insecurity in the community.

Following their conversation, Garces joined Dennis Pullin at an event in Camden where Virtua showcased its award-winning fleet of mobile health vehicles. Dennis had the opportunity to further immerse Garces into the Virtua brand and introduce him specifically to our Eat Well team to showcase the mutual passion and interest in addressing food insecurity in our area.

Listen on your preferred podcast platform or watch the video podcast.

Upcoming Events

All Clinicians Invited to Learn from Liver Disease Experts, Sept. 30

Learn from the experts as they speak on a variety of topics across the spectrum of liver care at “The Non-Hepatologist’s Guide to Caring for Patients with Liver Disease” at the Barry D. Brown Health Education Center (HEC) on Saturday, Sept. 30, with collaborative sessions 8 to 11:15 a.m.

Click [here](#) to register. For CME information and details, click to [view the flyer](#). For the day’s agenda, click [here](#). For more information, please contact Natalie Frament at NFrament@virtua.org or 215-528-1195.

Haddon Avenue Street Festival Postponed Rain Date to Be Sept. 30

Due to expected inclement weather this Saturday, the annual Haddon Avenue Street Festival is now scheduled for Saturday, Sept. 30, 12 to 6 p.m. Virtua is a proud supporter of the street festival, which lines Haddon Avenue just a few blocks north of Virtua Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital between Kaighn Avenue and Mechanic Street.

Presented by Parkside Business & Community in Partnership (PBCIP), the free annual event features musical performances, giveaways, social services, and family fun. There will be food, clothing, jewelry, music, and art, as well as a kid’s fun zone with moon bounce, video game truck, pop-up basketball games, face painting, and a children’s book festival. Virtua’s Community Health Engagement colleagues will be on hand with health screenings and wellness education, seated chair massages, as well as with exhibits from Virtua Home Health and Virtua Heart Failure. To learn more, click [here](#).

We’re Stepping Up for Cancer Survivorship with the American Cancer Society

“The Penn Medicine | Virtua Health Cancer Program is proud to support two upcoming American Cancer Society events that are always so inspirational,” said Matthew Puc, MD, Virtua thoracic surgeon, and the program’s director. “Feel free to join us.”

Relay For Life of Moorestown Saturday, Sept. 30

The event takes place from 8 to 9p.m. and includes a beautiful luminaria ceremony that will light up the Moorestown High School track in honor of every life touched by cancer. Learn more at relayforlife.org/moorestownregion.

Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Greater Philadelphia & Southern NJ Walk

Saturday, Oct. 15

Cooper River Park in Pennsauken

“It will be a great day to support our community and go for a walk,” said Dr. Puc. The 25th annual event starts at 8:30 a.m. and the 3.1-mile walk begins at 9:45 a.m., rain or shine. Look for the Virtua sponsored Survivor’s Tent.

To sign up, go to MakingStridesWalk.org/GPSNJ.

IDEA – Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity for All

While LGBTQ+ Pride Month was celebrated in June, we will offer resources during National LGBTQ+ History Month in October, National Coming Out Day (Oct. 11), and International Pronouns Day (Oct. 18). Show support by joining the OUT at Virtua Colleague Community at the Pride Parade on Oct. 5 at 6 p.m. and Community Night on Oct. 6 at 5 p.m. For more details and to sign up to volunteer, connect with [Meghan Walsh](#) or [Jake Semple](#).

Exploring Culture and Career Paths, Presented by VirtuAsia

Oct. 19, 5 to 7 p.m.

The VirtuAsia Colleague Community invites all colleagues for an honest and eye-opening panel discussion. The panelists will share their personal journeys as they navigate the complexities of career development and cultural identity. Additionally, savor an assortment of Asian-influenced refreshments and beverages and get a chance to win raffle baskets inspired by Asian culture.

Click to register: [Exploring Culture and Career Paths, presented by VirtuAsia](#)

Raise a Brush to Our Culture

Oct. 3, 5 to 8 p.m.

In recognition of Global Diversity Awareness Month, the WE Thrive well-being team and our Colleague Communities have organized an evening of connecting, painting, music, and conscious cocktails at the Virtua Barry D. Brown Health Education Center (106 Carnie Boulevard, Voorhees).

Book your seat today: [Raise a Brush to our Culture](#)