

# A wedding guest. A grad's father. What COVID breakthrough cases look like in N.J.

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A doctor extracts the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine out of a vial at a vaccination site in New York.

She was already sick when the email arrived.

Donna Knapp received the note in early July, four days after returning from her cousin's wedding in Cincinnati. One of the guests had contracted COVID-19, the email read, a person who had been fully vaccinated.

Alarm bells started ringing for Knapp, who was sneezing and congested. Her symptoms only got worse: fever, chills, sore throat and diarrhea.

Knapp, 61, had been fully vaccinated herself with the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine six months earlier. She found the prospect of being infected jarring, coming at a time when she thought

she was protected and people were shedding their masks and living carefree for the first time since the pandemic started.

“America was happy and rejoicing at that point that they were actually able to go out and do things again, and we were right along with that,” the Cherry Hill resident told NJ Advance Media, noting that the wedding was filled with unmasked people dancing, laughing and hugging.

A test soon confirmed her fears: Knapp had become one of New Jersey’s rare “[breakthrough cases](#),” a fully vaccinated person who still contracted the coronavirus.

“I guess I was in a state of confusion,” said Knapp, an assistant vice president of finance at Virtua Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Camden.

Breakthrough infections are [uncommon but rising](#) as the [highly contagious Delta variant](#) has once again sent COVID-19 caseloads soaring. There have been 7,112 breakthrough cases — 0.14% of all positive tests in the state — as of July 26, according to the New Jersey Department of Health. Only [50 people](#) — or 0.001% — have died, while 212 people, 0.004%, needed to be admitted to a hospital.

Knapp is among those 7,000-plus cases, as is Joseph Sapone, a 62-year-old Shrewsbury resident infected while celebrating his daughter’s college graduation. Neither needed to be hospitalized, although both struggled with symptoms.

“I think if we hadn’t developed this more contagious variant we wouldn’t be dealing with this issue — to the same degree — on breakthrough cases,” said Dr. Martin Topiel, chief of infectious diseases at Virtua Health in South Jersey.

But state health officials emphasize that the vaccines still protect against the variant, especially in preventing hospitalization and death.

“The vaccines are still proving themselves highly effective,” state epidemiologist Dr. Tina Tan said Friday in a statement. “Based on our data through July 26, less than 1 per 10,000 vaccinations are resulting in COVID cases requiring hospitalizations or resulting in death.”

Tan’s statement noted that from July 20 to July 26, “we counted 4,332 new positive cases. 3,529 of these — that’s 81.5% — were of unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated people.”

Breakthrough cases are usually mild and rarely lead to hospitalization. Still, they are increasing nationally and in New Jersey. Post-vaccination infections are becoming another facet of the pandemic — albeit an unusual one.

Many are wondering whether they might need a [booster shot](#) in the near future. That remains to be seen. However, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved boosters last week for those with [weakened immune systems](#).

“We do have people in the hospital who have Delta who have been vaccinated, but they’re not seriously ill. They’re not on ventilators,” said Barry Kreiswirth, a scientist at Hackensack

Meridian Health's Center for Discovery and Innovation. "They're probably sick, but they go home."

That's the main point, he emphasized.

"The goal of vaccines is really to prevent serious illness," Kreiswirth added, "and I don't understand why people don't think that's good enough."



Donna Knapp, 61, of Cherry Hill, contracted COVID-19 in July even after being fully vaccinated.

Sapone was among the breakthrough cases that developed only mild symptoms. But he remains concerned about post-vaccination infections.

"There has been some good information about how sick people really get and how many deaths there are versus how many breakthrough cases there are," he said. "But I think the public really needs to be more educated."

Sapone, a business manager at a chemical company, was infected in late June. He was fully vaccinated with the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine when he contracted the virus while on a trip to Indiana for his daughter's graduation from the University of Notre Dame.

"I went into one restaurant," he said, "and it was out in Indiana — you know, a state with a low vaccination rate. And (it was) one restaurant where I wasn't masked, and we were just celebrating my daughter's graduation."

He was stunned to learn he was positive, considering how careful he always is — usually wearing a mask wherever he goes.

"I mean how unlucky could you be?" Sapone said.

He isolated from his family as he recovered from mild symptoms — with the exception of a sore throat that he called "a sore throat from hell."

Knapp was a rarer breakthrough case, spending several days in agony.

“I had a fever of like 101, and I had the chills, and I was congested and I had a sore throat,” she recalled. “I was very nauseous, and I had diarrhea. And I had pretty much every symptom, except for (losing) smell and taste.”

She wasn’t hospitalized, but she did receive a monoclonal antibody infusion treatment at Virtua Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, which she said eased her symptoms.

She couldn’t believe she had contracted the virus after all that time working in a hospital.

“I was just disappointed after being careful for all that time that I was sick, and I really couldn’t believe it,” she said.

She learned that at least 15 others among the 260 wedding guests contracted the virus. It’s unclear how many were breakthrough cases.

It gave her pause to think about the day in Cincinnati when she and her family walked by Great American Ball Park during a Reds game.

“There were seas of people with no mask,” she recalled.

Knapp didn’t conclude her illness means the vaccine isn’t working. Quite the opposite in fact.

She has a message for others: Vaccines do really matter.

“I knew that my chances of getting really sick were so much less because I had the vaccines,” she said, “and I was so thankful at that point in time that I had the vaccines because I was so sick. I would have been so fearful if I didn’t have them. And I felt that they were a blessing just to carry me through, and for me not to end up in the hospital.

“I was very thankful for that.”