MEDIA RELEASE

Public Health Officials Urging Vaccination and Boosters Against COVID-19 Omicron Variant

HILLSBOROUGH, N.C. Jan. 5, 2022 — COVID-19 cases have risen 587% since the end of November in Orange County, with 1,010 new cases reported last week. Orange County health officials urge the public to take steps now to protect themselves and others and to avoid overwhelming hospital capacity and healthcare workers.

Most new cases are due to the extremely contagious variant Omicron, which is spreading rapidly and is expected to cause the pandemic's highest rates of COVID-19 infections in the coming weeks. Vaccinating and boosting against COVID-19 remain the most effective ways for people to protect themselves from serious illness, hospitalization, and death. Early evidence shows boosters provide a significant level of protection against Omicron.

This Winter Everyone Should:
- **Vaccinate and Boost:** Get vaccinated now, including obtaining a COVID-19 booster as soon as you are eligible. This is critical for those over age 65, those with underlying medical conditions and healthcare workers. The Moderna and Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines are the best choice for most people. Layer protection with a flu shot.
- **Test:** Get tested if you have any symptoms of COVID-19 or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.
- **Mask:** Wear a face covering indoors in public, even if you are vaccinated. If possible, wear a medical grade mask for more protection, such as a surgical mask, procedural mask, KN95, or N95.
- **Avoid large gatherings:** Omicron has spread quickly even in gatherings of vaccinated people where proof of negative tests was required.

Extra Protection Is More Important Now

"Omicron is highly contagious; therefore, well-fitting and high-quality face masks are immensely important. Wearing masks is nothing new. Masks have been among the most effective ways to limit the spread of COVID-19," said Renee Price, Chair of the Orange County Board of Commissioners. "With Omicron surging, we have to be more conscientious and diligent. Please take the necessary precautions by wearing masks and wearing them properly."

Orange County Health Director Quintana Stewart said, "If people wear face coverings and avoid indoor gatherings, it could help to flatten the curve. Currently our percentage of positive tests is 11.2% which is way above our goal of 5% or below. It is important for us to flatten the curve to

make sure we all continue to have access to hospital care when we need it, whether it's for COVID-19 or all of the other life-threatening conditions that demand care in a hospital."

High Quality Masks

Use the best quality and best-fitting mask you can get, especially in higher risk situations and if you are at increased risk for severe illness. Scenarios that call for better protection can include being in close and prolonged contact with people whose vaccination status is unknown, being in crowded indoor settings, riding on public transportation (especially when you can't keep distance), and working at a job where you interact with large numbers of people.

The highest quality masks, in order, are:

- **N95, KN95 and KF94.** These disposable masks are better at filtering the virus and are more widely available now for the public. Replacement depends on amount of wear. These masks can be more expensive. Beware of counterfeits.
- **Surgical masks.** These disposable masks should be tested to meet a national standard (ASTM 2/3).
- **Cloth masks with at least two layers**. A disposable mask also can be worn underneath a cloth mask. (Note: N95/KN95 masks should not be layered with other masks.)

Masks that are loose, with gaps around your face or nose, are not as helpful in protecting you or others. For visuals of these tips, visit the guidance for improved mask use from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

If you see someone without a face covering, assume they have a valid reason for not wearing one and increase your distance from that person.

For more information on masks visit the Orange County Health Department face coverings page.

Related Links

- Visit the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services website for more information about boosters and additional doses. More information about vaccines for kids can be found here.
- To find a vaccine location, or for more information about COVID-19 vaccines in North Carolina, visit MySpot.nc.gov or call the state's COVID-19 Vaccine Help Center for free at 888-675-4567.
- Visit the Orange County Health Department website for information on vaccines, boosters, testing and masks.

Related Graphics

- Weekly COVID-19 Case Count for Orange County, North Carolina from Nov. 20 to Dec. 31, 2021 **Link to Graphic**

Weekly COVID-19 Case Count for Orange County, North Carolina from November 20 to December 31, 2021
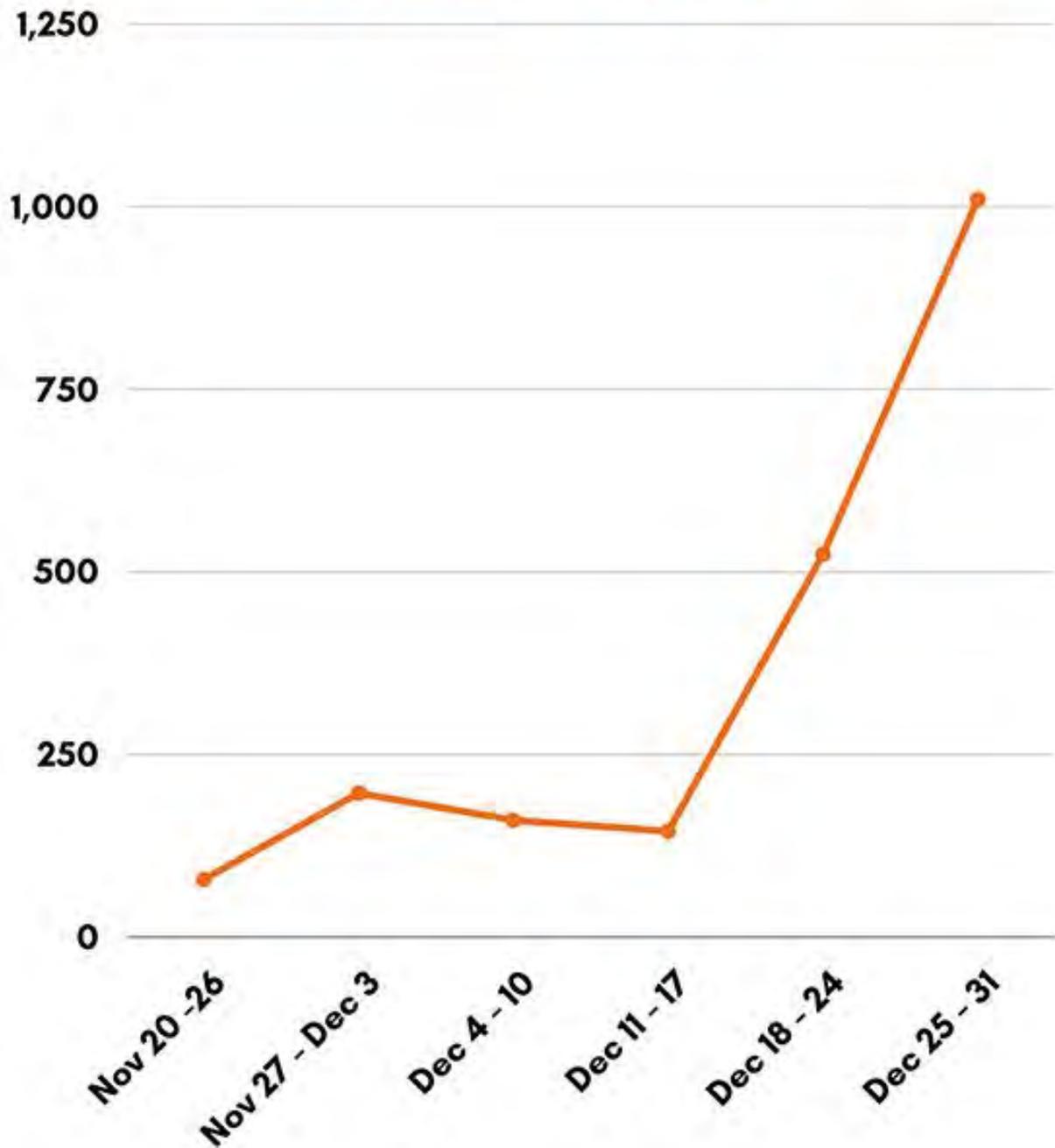
- How to Wear a Mask: English, Spanish, Chinese, Burmese, and Karen

- How Effective Are Cloth Masks: English, Spanish, and Chinese

- Should I Double Mask: English, Spanish, and Chinese

Should I double mask?

COVID-19 spreads primarily from person to person through respiratory droplets that spread into the air when you cough, sneeze, talk, shout, or sing.

Cloth masks reduce the spray of droplets when worn over the nose and mouth.

INCREASE EFFECTIVENESS

Use multiple layers of fabric or double mask. Use fabric combinations like cotton-silk, cotton-chiffon, or cotton-flannel. High thread count fabrics are most effective. Wearing two masks can increase effectiveness. Wearing a cloth mask on top of a surgical mask mimics the filter-cloth combo found to be more protective in studies. The surgical mask acts as a filter and the cloth mask provides an additional layer of protection while improving the fit.

Keep your mask clean. Wash your cloth mask whenever it gets dirty or at least daily. Include your mask with your regular laundry. Use regular laundry detergent and the appropriate settings according to the fabric label.

MASK EFFECTIVENESS

Many people infected with the COVID-19 virus never develop symptoms, but they may still transmit the disease. Others who become sick can transmit the disease before any symptoms begin.

Masks are proven effective at protecting both the wearer and everyone around them. Combined with social distancing, masks offer the most effective method at slowing the spread.

AVOID

GAPS: Your mask should fit snugly but not so tight that it impairs your breathing. The idea is to trap your droplets inside the mask and to not let them seep out the sides of the mask. This is why it is so important to wear it over your nose and mouth as they produce the droplets.

VALVES: Do not use masks with exhalation valves. The valve makes it easier to breathe out, but it also releases your droplets into the air, so it doesn't protect others if you're contagious. Protecting others is the primary reason to wear a mask.

Children under 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the masks without help should **NOT** use cloth face coverings.

Remember, face coverings should cover both the nose and mouth and fit snugly but comfortably against the sides of the face.

Test your mask fabric by holding it up to the light. If you can easily see the outline of the individual fibers, it's not going to make a great filter.

ORANGE COUNTY
HEALTH DEPARTMENT

www.orangecountync.gov/Masks

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