TO: School, child care, and early childhood education administrators in Multnomah County

We are writing to let you know that the Multnomah County Health Department is making a very strong public advisory to take action to protect the public health at this time. You probably know that the Portland area healthcare systems and the children’s hospitals in particular are under enormous strain right now due to a surge in respiratory winter viruses. We are hopeful that RSV is peaking in the very near future, but influenza is climbing and there are signals that COVID-19 hospitalizations are also on the rise. In general influenza is known to cause severe illness in young children, the elderly and those with underlying conditions.

This afternoon Multnomah County will state clear guidance that OHA and others have released about what individuals can do to lower their risk of illness, while protecting the health of the whole community. This respiratory season: everyone should mask indoors until at least Jan 1, 2023, including in K-12 schools and child care. The goal is to support hospitals and keep kids and staff well enough to continue attending school in person.

This is an individual-level recommendation that is voluntary. There is no expectation that organizations change their masking policy. This recommendation is in addition to other familiar public health advice: be up to date on flu and COVID vaccines, wash hands well, disinfect shared surfaces, stay home when ill, and avoid large gatherings if you are at high risk of severe illness. RSV in particular is readily spread on surfaces and by hands. Masks help to prevent spread if an individual is shedding the virus and by reminding all of us to keep our hands away from our nose and eyes unless they are clean. Ready access to hand sanitizer and encouragement of hand-hygiene make an important difference.

We anticipate the health care situation will remain dynamic. Thank you in advance for your support, we are available to answer any questions as needed.

Dr. Jennifer Vines, Multnomah County Health Officer
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