



BERRIEN COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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For Immediate Release

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Berrien County Health Department Updates Mask Guidance for Public Settings, Including Schools

Benton Harbor, Michigan, Feb. 17, 2022 – The Berrien County Health Department is shifting its COVID-19 guidance for indoor public settings, including K-12 schools, from “mask recommended” to “mask optional.”

The decision was made based on recognition of decreasing COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations, increased testing supplies and vaccinations, as well as availability of treatment options. The revised guidance recognizes Berrien County is in a far different – and far better – place in both understanding COVID-19 and having tools to combat it, according to Acting Health Officer Guy Miller.

Berrien County’s announcement followed Wednesday’s updated mask guidance from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services as the state enters the “recovery” or “post-surge” phase of the pandemic, where “no immediate resurgence is predicted.”

“Local data shows COVID-19 is a declining threat to our community,” Miller explained. “Berrien County residents now have the tools in place to make choices based on their health status and their risk tolerance, something that was not readily available over the past two years.

“Our expanded toolkit allows for individuals to get vaccinated, wear a well-fitting KN95 mask, get tested when ill, receive therapy or treatment when appropriate and be admitted to the hospital if necessary.”

Although the case rate continues to decrease in Berrien County, COVID-19 is still in the community. BCHD recommends people who are ill should stay away from others, isolate and pursue testing if available.

Miller stressed the Health Department's guidance remains for those who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or recently had close contact with someone who has COVID-19. Those who are in isolation or quarantine should continue to follow BCHD guidance on isolation and quarantining.

The following data points are used in support of the mask optional guidance:

- Improved knowledge about the transmission of SARS-CoV-2.
- Wide availability of the COVID-19 vaccine, which is a safe and effective way to prevent serious illness and death.
- An 86% vaccination rate for residents 65 and older in combination with federal estimates that say 90% of all Americans have had COVID-19 and developed an immune response of some sort.
- Continued decline in new cases, which are now below 200 per 100,000 residents.
- Continued decline in positivity rates, which are approximately 15%.
- Increased availability of tests.
- A 60% decline in COVID-19 in-patients at the local hospital.
- Enhanced availability of outpatient therapeutics, including oral antiviral treatments and monoclonal antibodies.
- Improved treatment options for hospitals, including Remdesivir, convalescent plasma and other treatment combinations.

MDHHS and BCHD continue to recommend that all individuals, regardless of vaccination status, practice universal masking in high-risk congregate settings, including long-term care facilities, homeless shelters, correctional facilities, jails and health care facilities. When making a decision to wear or not wear a mask, people should consider those around them who may be adversely affected by COVID-19.

BCHD continues to monitor for emerging infectious diseases. Should a new and deadly strain of COVID-19 emerge, appropriate recommendations will be made for the health and safety of the community.

For more information about BCHD's COVID-19 response, visit bchdmi.org/covid19.

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