

*The public health update message below was sent to members of the campus community from Dr. Tom McLarney, Medical Director.*

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To the Wesleyan Community,

It's so good to see everyone back on campus! Hats off to all who braved the remnants of Hurricane Ida for a successful Arrival Week and start to the fall semester.

COVID-19 has evolved since our previous academic year. During the summer, the Delta variant of the SARS CoV-2 virus began to take hold. The more prevalent the variant became, the more we realized the specific ways it is problematic:

- It is more contagious and transmissible than the native (alpha) strain that we first experienced. The alpha variant level of contagion was similar to influenza. The Delta is more like chicken pox.
- With spikes in the summer, the concern is that it could become more widespread in the fall and winter.
- This variant has become the most common strain of the SARS CoV-2 virus.

Vaccination against COVID continues to be our best protection. Although it is true that a fully vaccinated person can contract COVID, the risk of serious disease, hospitalization and death is significantly decreased. Ninety-nine percent of the student body and 96.5 percent of the staff and faculty are fully vaccinated. This is an important step toward keeping us all healthy.

To ensure that our campus remains safe, we have instituted twice-a-week surveillance testing. This testing gives us an opportunity to evaluate cases and close contacts in a timely and efficient manner. In addition, we mandated masking for both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals when indoors (which follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations) and we continue to recommend frequent hand washing as an effective preventative measure.

We have modified our approach from last academic year to isolation for positive cases and quarantine for those who have had close contact with a positive case:

- A fully vaccinated asymptomatic person who tests positive for COVID will be placed in isolation, because this individual could still pass the SARS CoV-2 virus to others. The delta variant hits fast, so we will re-test cases at approximately day one or two and again at day three or four. If both tests are negative, the student will be released from isolation. If either test is positive, that person will isolate for 10 days.
- A person who is not fully vaccinated, symptomatic and who tests positive will be placed in isolation for 10 days.
- A person who is fully vaccinated, symptomatic and who tests positive will be placed in isolation for 10

- A fully vaccinated asymptomatic close contact would not need to quarantine. They will be tested in three to five days. That person should report any concerning symptoms and take all safety precautions.
- A person who is not fully vaccinated and who is a close contact would need to quarantine for 10 days.

This year the Broad Institute, our testing partner, is reporting cycle thresholds (cT). The cycle threshold is essentially the number of times that the RT-PCR test “looks” for the SARS CoV-2 virus. The maximum cycles that Broad uses is 40. If a cycle threshold is greater than 35, that person is at low risk of infecting others.

Individuals whose cycle threshold is less than 35 must be especially vigilant with their COVID precautions and retest. One cycle threshold is a solitary point on a graph and does not indicate the direction it is going. The repeat test may show increasing (less risk of infection), decreasing (more risk of infection) or be negative, which would tell us that the initial positive result had very little SARS CoV-2 viral material which is no longer present.

The pandemic has proven to be fluid, unpredictable and frustrating. Recall that if a virus cannot replicate, it cannot mutate. High vaccination rates decrease the opportunity for replication and mutation and are an important step on our journey towards normalcy.

We will be monitoring our situation on campus very closely and will adjust our protocols accordingly.

I wish you all a very successful (and healthy!) semester!

Tom McLarney MD