

Carbon County Public Health: Covid and vaccination FAQs

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The last two years have been extremely difficult for most. Many people have been hospitalized, died, or have suffered long-term consequences of Covid infection. Others have felt the harms of the pandemic in different ways, such as loss of jobs and security, mental health issues, and reduced access to other healthcare needs (Green, Fernandez & MacPhail, 2021). In the midst of all of this, our amazing healthcare workers have taken the brunt of the fallout, often working long hard hours to take care of very sick Covid patients, dealing with worsening mental health issues, and mitigating other impacts on the health and well-being of their patients, while dealing with their own lack of sleep, physical needs, and fragile emotional health.

We are brand new as a county health department and are in the process of rebuilding from the ground up in the middle of these difficulties. As the new Carbon County Public Health Medical Director, I would like to start by addressing some of the current pressing concerns and frequently asked questions over recent weeks.

Q. I've been vaccinated, how is it possible that I have Covid?

Vaccination is still currently the best way to prevent serious illness resulting in hospitalization or death. Vaccination is also very effective in reducing the chance of becoming infected with Covid, but like all vaccines, breakthrough infections are possible and do occur. This is especially significant among patients that are elderly, immunocompromised, or that have underlying health conditions. "Studies show after getting vaccinated against COVID-19, protection against the virus and the ability to prevent infection with variants may decrease over time" (CDC, 2021). This is why the CDC currently recommends booster doses for all individuals 18 years of age and older whose last vaccination was six or more months ago. These boosters can further enhance the immune response and aid in the prevention of serious illness as well as reduce the chance of contracting Covid.

So, are breakthrough infections possible? Absolutely. However, the best way to avoid serious illness is through prevention. Currently vaccination is the most preventative therapy that we have. In addition to vaccination, and booster doses for those whose last dose was six or more months ago, preventative steps also require good management of other healthcare conditions. This requires maintaining a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, maintaining a healthy weight, smoking cessation, and taking medication as prescribed for adequate control of issues such as diabetes and hypertension.

Q. Why do I need to get vaccinated if treatments for Covid are now available?

It is very understandable why many people still experience hesitancy when it comes to vaccination. In the last two years we have had to rapidly respond collectively to address a global pandemic that has often overwhelmed healthcare resources worldwide. This has caused a lot of angst for people as they watched vaccines and emergency treatments developed rapidly, a process that has previously taken years. However, in reality the technology for COVID vaccine

development has been ongoing for many years. The pandemic also offered opportunity for us to bring resources and departments together collectively to be more efficient and timelier in the process of vaccine development and testing.

I often have patients make appointments with me that are vaccine hesitant to obtain more information about vaccination. The speed of vaccine development is often one of their biggest concerns. In simplified terms, I explain Covid vaccine development with this analogy: Ford was not the first automobile to be created. However, it was Ford that came along and demonstrated a better way to streamline the process of building automobiles that were affordable and built with standards in production. A look at I-90 on a busy morning commute is a testament to their history. While this may seem like an oversimplified analogy, this is in essence what happened when a vaccine was needed for the current Covid pandemic by cutting out unnecessary red tape, in order to work together with rigor and speed.

During these appointments, I also find that many patients' vaccine hesitancy is because they feel bullied or pushed into something that they don't really understand. Their confusion is only amplified by the plethora of information on possible treatments, treatments proven to be effective, versus those no longer recommended, or proven to be harmful. Very few of them subscribe to debunked myths and conspiracy theories, yet they are often embarrassed by their questions. This brings me back to the core of one of the most important ethical tenants of my previous training as a nurse: practicing the ethics of patient self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is a process of empowering patients to make informed healthcare decisions. The best way to make informed medical decisions for yourself and your family is to seek education from your medically trained healthcare provider to overcome the noise and confusion that can be found across the internet and social media. Like any treatment with medication or preventative strategies with vaccination, there will always be associated risks. My recommendation per the current evidence is that the benefits of vaccination far outweigh these risks for the vast majority, and prevention is the first line treatment. Per the CDC (2021), adults and all children over the age of five are currently eligible for vaccination against COVID.

It is also true that more evidence-based treatments are becoming available to treat moderate to severe Covid illness (*National Institute of Health, 2021*). However, not everyone will meet the criteria for some of the current outpatient treatments (such as monoclonal antibodies) or they may not always be available in certain locations. Perhaps most importantly, getting Covid and missing work, feeling miserable, isolating from vulnerable family members, and incurring the healthcare costs of obtaining treatment is likely to be much more inconvenient and unpleasant than taking the necessary preventative measures. In patients with underlying health conditions at risk of more serious illness, this becomes even more important. I also remind my healthy patients that are more likely to only experience mild symptoms to consider their exposure to others that may be at risk of more serious disease with whom they have contact. Vaccination can help reduce this risk.

Q. Do I qualify for a Covid booster?

Given the identification of the new Omicron Covid variant, more people are inquiring about obtaining booster vaccination. The CDC currently recommends boosters for all ages over the age of 18 at least six months after their last vaccination dose (CDC, 2021). Further, the booster dose does not have to be the same as their original vaccine series. It may be weeks before we have more data on the current Omicron variant. Per very early data it is possible that this variant may elude current vaccination (CDC, 2021). However, early data also suggest that vaccination boosters still provide significant protection against serious illness. We also do not yet know if Omicron will cause the same severity of illness as the Delta variant (CDC, 2021) but the Health Department is continuing to monitor this closely and will offer guidance as it becomes available. As of right now boosters can be obtained through Beartooth Billings Clinic. The Public Health Department is in the process of finalizing our vaccination structure so that we can offer this option in the coming months.

Q. What mandates are currently in force for me or my business?

Current Montana law prohibits discrimination based on vaccination status (*Montana Department of Labor and Industry, 2021*). In February 2021 all Covid restrictions and mandates were rescinded in Montana. Currently, federal vaccine mandates for private businesses, healthcare workers (*Montana DPHHS, 2021*), and federal workers have also been temporally stayed. As a result, Public Health has developed guidance that is based upon the Montana Department of Health and CDC guidelines for vaccination, masking, quarantining, and what to do in cases of exposure to Covid positive individuals. Our goal is to promote the tenet of self-efficacy to empower individuals in the community to make the right healthcare decisions that will protect our community, prevent further spread of the virus, and allow businesses, schools, and public places to remain open.

This includes, strongly educating and encouraging vaccination; masking around vulnerable individuals and in large gatherings when social distancing cannot be maintained; self-quarantining with symptoms of illness or prolonged exposure of 15 minutes or more in a 24-hour period to a Covid positive individual; frequent testing; and seeking direct guidance from a healthcare professional for questions about prevention and treatment decisions. My hope is that individuals will take this guidance seriously as remaining open is the best way to also mitigate some of the other public health issues that have come to the forefront during the past two years. I would highly encourage all individuals and or businesses to please reach out to Public Health if they are needing assistance in developing their own policies based upon the current CDC recommendations to mitigate the risk of Covid spread. Please refer to the below references for more information and guidance.

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