

## **Minnesota officials release data on rare breakthrough COVID cases**

Minnesota has seen at least 5,599 breakthrough cases of COVID-19 and at least 57 deaths among fully vaccinated people — figures that represent a tiny fraction of the state's immunized population, health officials reported Tuesday.

The Minnesota Department of Health said it will begin reporting breakthrough case numbers weekly as the highly infectious delta variant surges across the state and nationwide. But the department cautioned that the numbers will lag because of reporting delays.

The department also said there have been 514 breakthrough cases resulting in hospitalizations.

Health department officials say COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective, and only a small percentage of people who are fully vaccinated will still get the disease if they are exposed to the coronavirus. They say that's normal with any vaccine.

The state's total number of breakthrough cases represented only about 0.2 percent of the population of fully vaccinated Minnesotans, while the number of deaths was just 0.002 percent of the fully vaccinated population, the department's announcement said.

More than 3 million Minnesotans have completed the vaccine series, or about two-thirds of the population 16 and older, department figures show. The state has recorded over 620,000 cases and 7,700 deaths.

Breakthrough cases are often asymptomatic, says Mayo Clinic infectious disease expert Dr. John O'Horo. He says cases are being found through routine testing before medical procedures or travel, not because people are obviously sick.

“That makes it sound like the vaccines aren't working as well as they should. What the vaccines were built for and what they do quite admirably is reducing the incidence of severe disease, meaning those who get hospitalized.”

O'Horo says that the tiny fraction of people who go on to be hospitalized for reasons associated with COVID-19 after vaccination often have weakened immune systems — they're immunocompromised, or the vaccine is less effective for them because of their age.

Gov. Tim Walz reiterated that vaccinations are the key to returning to normal. He told reporters he was encouraged that the state has recorded a jump in vaccinations over the last few days to the highest levels since May.

Walz said the \$100 gift cards the state is offering to unvaccinated people who get their shots has helped, with over 30,400 people taking advantage of the reward in the program's first 72 hours. He said the incentive has had some of the most takers in the rural counties with the lowest vaccination rates.

“So it feels like there's momentum,” Walz said.

The Democratic governor said his administration is still considering whether to mandate vaccinations for state employees, “trying to come up with what is the best, safest way to make sure our employees can return, keeping themselves, their families and others safe, and I think in the next coming days we'll be prepared to announce what that plan will look like.”

That statement drew quick criticism from Republican Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka, of East Gull Lake.

“Mandates are not the solution,” Gazelka said in a statement. “There are other options, such as working from home and distancing for those who choose to not be vaccinated. Vaccines are widely available for those who want them and are incredibly effective at preventing the spread and impact of COVID. But a mandate is divisive and unproductive.”

Several Minnesota health care systems, private employers, the University of Minnesota system and other universities in recent days have announced plans for vaccine mandates as they prepare for workers and students to return, while some major Minnesota companies have put their return-to-the-office plans on hold as they wait to see how the delta variant plays out.

The Minnesota House on Tuesday reimposed a mask mandate on members and staff for the parts of the Capitol complex that it controls. Minneapolis and St. Paul reimposed mask mandates on city workers last week.

A bipartisan working group of state representatives on Tuesday heard pleas from hospital workers as it held its fourth hearing to develop a \$250 million bonus package for frontline workers who put their lives and health on the line during the pandemic. The panel faces difficult choices in deciding which workers should be eligible, how much they should get and who will be left out. It's due to report back by Sept. 6.

Walz said he and legislative leaders knew from the start when they agreed to develop the package that some deserving frontline workers would be left out of the bonuses this time around. He acknowledged that they probably will be “highly disappointed” and added, “I think that will motivate us to come back” for a second round.