

New COVID variants drive many Minnesotans to get their vaccination at last

Every day, a slow stream of Minnesotans finally is getting vaccinated after months of hesitancy. When hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans rushed to get vaccinated against COVID-19, Brian Cunningham waited.

Concerned about long-term side effects, the 47-year-old Chaska resident wanted to at least hold off on a shot until the Food and Drug Administration gave vaccines final approval.

His trepidation, however, was trumped by the highly transmissible delta variant first detected in India and now the dominant strain in Minnesota and the United States.

As COVID-19 cases surge among the unvaccinated in some parts of the country, hospitalizations and deaths from the viral respiratory disease are rising. With 47% of Minnesota residents not fully vaccinated, public health officials are concerned that the variant could fuel another wave of cases.

So on a recent steamy summer day, Cunningham stepped into a makeshift vaccine bus parked near the Chanhassen High School ballfields to get his shot.

"I work with a lot of people in India, and I know the situation there," he said. "It's very traumatic."

Every day, a slow stream of Minnesotans finally is getting vaccinated after months of hesitancy. Some, like Cunningham, want protection from the delta variant. Others are eager for the freedom those already immunized enjoy. Still others are succumbing to pressure from loved ones who fear hospitalization or worse.

Eva Rosas of Chaska was vaccinated months ago, but her partner, Juvenal Hernandez, wouldn't get a shot despite losing close friends, including some in their 40s, to COVID-19.

"He was scared," she said, noting his fear was based on vaccine myths and misinformation from a friend, social media and other outlets.

"I think I just overthought it," he said in Spanish.

For months, Rosas countered with facts gleaned from news stories. Finally, she delivered an emotional plea.

"I said, 'You don't want to get sick. I don't want to lose you. We have three kids, and I don't want them to be without their father,' " Rosas told him.

Every shot helps

Shortly before the Chanhassen Red Birds played host to the Chaska Cubs, Rosas escorted Hernandez and her father, 65-year-old Pasqual Rosas, to the vaccine bus near the baseball field. Medical issues had kept her dad from getting a shot sooner.

The vaccine team delivered 20 doses during a three-hour stint — a fraction of what was given during the early weeks after the buses hit the road in mid-April. Metro Transit bus driver Tom McMahon proudly recalls the team delivering as many as 550 to 600 shots during a four-day stretch this spring. But in recent weeks, they have been happy to get a dozen takers during a single stop.

"It's disappointing because you know there are more people out there that need it," said McMahon, who lost his uncle to COVID-19.

Statewide, vaccinations have dropped from a peak of 1.6 million doses in April to about 370,000 in June. Despite the trend, health officials keep pushing to reach as many Minnesotans as possible.

As long as the virus spreads, it can mutate, creating variants that could increase the severity of the disease, limit the ability to detect and treat it, and possibly render the vaccines less effective, said Kris Ehresmann, who leads the infectious disease division at the Minnesota Department of Health.

The delta variant is far more transmissible than the virus that originated more than a year and a half ago, she said.

"Anybody who is getting vaccinated, we're celebrating that," Ehresmann said. "I don't care what kept them away before. ... Every person who gets vaccinated makes a difference."

Incentives differ

Maddie Tompkins, 29, of Chaska, said she initially put off a shot amid concerns about long-term side effects. But with the delta variant circulating and her Aug. 7 scaled-down, backyard wedding approaching, she showed up at the Chanhassen ballfield hoping immunization will protect her guests, particularly older relatives.

Ti Se, 50, of Mayer, stopped by after being reassured that others he knew who had been vaccinated had suffered no ill effects. With proof of vaccination in hand, Se said, he is happy he'll be allowed to go to work without a mask.

"I wear glasses, so wearing a mask makes them fog up and it's harder to breathe," he said.

Joel Biebighauser, 44, of Chanhassen, delayed a shot, in part because he didn't want to take off work to get it or lose work time if he suffered a reaction that left him ill. He also was wary of side effects after a friend who works in pharmaceutical sales expressed concerns.

"If you go to a car salesman and he tells you he's concerned about the car you're looking at, you might also be concerned," Biebighauser said.

But last week, those fears were overshadowed by his sixth-grade daughter's upcoming return to school. The vaccine may keep Biebighauser from infecting her while safeguarding him should she bring the virus home. "I'm a single parent, so it's just the two of us," he said.

Some are getting the shot now so they can do more of what they want with fewer complications tied to COVID restrictions.

Carson Liebeg, 19, of Victoria, will be able to go to class without a mask at the University of St. Thomas, and Cole Zwiefel, 18, of Chaska, can play football mask-free at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He'll also be able to hang out with his vaccinated teammates.

"I was told that if you're unvaccinated, you would be separated from those who are," he said. "I don't want that. I want to be with my team."

Initially, 18-year-old Josh Nelson of Excelsior was in no hurry to get vaccinated. But with his family headed to Hawaii in October, he wanted protection to avoid having to quarantine there for 10 days as required for the unvaccinated.

Similarly, Jake Busse, 39, of Glencoe, Minn., is eager to finally visit the hunting and outfitting lodge he owns with two others in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan now that Canada plans to reopen its border next month to fully vaccinated Americans.

"I have a half-million dollars invested in a business I love. I want to see it," he said after getting a shot in the mobile unit next to the Southwest Carver County Food Shelf in Norwood Young America.

His wife, Kim, 43, also got a shot, saying "I didn't want him to do it alone."

A hard sell

Only about 40 to 50% of Norwood Young America's residents are vaccinated, with higher rates among older residents, said Mayor Carol Lagergren. Persuading holdouts has been a hard sell, she said, but it's not stopping the retired teacher and school administrator from educating people about the benefits of vaccination.

"I think people's minds are being changed," she said. "We want to give people every opportunity to be vaccinated. If you can't get to the clinic, we'll bring it to you. ... We need to be ready when they are."

For Gina Wickenhauser, 52, the chance to get the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine at the mobile unit was too good to pass up, easing her anxiety after hearing "horror stories" from those who became ill after their required second shot of the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines.

"This is one and done," she said. "I don't have to worry for a month about what a second shot would bring."

Her husband, Tim Zellmann,, 55, showed up, too, despite a bit of skepticism from an online farm forum and a nurse who said she was leery of it.

"This was convenient, and she kind of made me come," he said, referring to his wife.

"But," he added, "she can't make me do what I don't want."