

- For tuning in today to an update on the COVID-19 pandemic from San Luis Obispo County Public Health Department. My name is Michelle Shoresman and today is Thursday, July 29th, 2021. This afternoon, we have four speakers for you. We will begin with San Luis Obispo County health officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein. She will be followed by executive director of the San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau, Mr. Brent Burchett, the forensic pathologist for the San Luis Obispo Sheriff Coroner's office, Dr. Joye Carter, and local pediatrician serving San Luis Obispo County youth and families for 35 years, Dr. Rene Bravo. After all their remarks, there'll be a short amount of time for questions. Thank you again to our in American sign language interpreter, Robin Babb, and now, San Luis Obispo County health officer Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Good afternoon my friends in the media and the public. It is really with some disappointment that I come before you at this moment in time, we had hoped to have a longer stretch since we saw the pandemic really get under control a mere couple of months ago, as we exited the blueprint for a safer economy on June 15th, we were at a place in our county and in the state where the pandemic was really receding. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case today. Statewide, the cases are growing very rapidly. So for the most recent week of data made available to us for the week of July 7th through the 14th, we are now at a seven day average of 13.1 cases per hundred thousand population for unvaccinated people. However, the good news is for those who are vaccinated, our case rate remains as low as it was two months ago, two per 100,000 people.

So you can see this is really a differential based on vaccination. But with that, locally, we have seen our cases rise considerably since June 15th, when we had approximately 50 active cases at that point, as of this past Monday, we sit at 274 active cases of COVID-19 in our county. Also on June 15th, we had 261 deaths and we had gone for a month without incident in terms of deaths, the last one was recorded May 17th. We have now added four additional completely preventable deaths to our numbers, such that we now have 265 people who have lost their lives. Families who are suffering from a disease that is in fact preventable, certainly in terms of deaths. So what I'd like to say about this is largely in the realm of vaccine. We certainly have other preventative measures, but what you're largely going to hear from us today is that vaccines work, they're safe, they're effective. They really make all the difference.

We've been recently asked often about our new cases, hospitalizations and deaths. So I'm here to share to you today that what is going on in our county closely mirrors what you've been hearing nationally and at the state level. So with this vaccine, only a very small percent of those who have been fully vaccinated, that's the one dose or two doses, depending on the product plus two weeks, for that portion of the population, the numbers, since January of cases amongst unvaccinated people, they comprise 98.5% of all cases, further 97.5% of all hospitalizations in the past six months plus and 99.2% of deaths have occurred in unvaccinated individuals, one of those recent deaths in fact, was in a fully vaccinated person, that person had significant immune compromising conditions, such that vaccines are not perfect. We are seeing cases of breakthrough among those who are vaccinated for the most part, much milder disease or no symptoms without hospitalization, without death. But there are some people that continue to be vulnerable even post vaccination, if they are medically fragile or severely immune compromised. So to put these numbers in a slightly different perspective, I'd like to offer this, that unvaccinated people are nearly 70 times, or 69 times to be

precise, more likely to get COVID disease than are vaccinated individuals. Inversely vaccinated individuals in the county are 99% less likely to get the disease than those who are unvaccinated.

So what I'd like to just ask of our community is that we make the leaps forward. We should not be seeing this level of disease and implications for our community at this time. And what I want to offer also is it is true that the majority of the unvaccinated people are younger, are healthier. So they may be thinking, you know, I'm not particularly at risk, but I also want to remind people about so-called long COVID or long haulers whereby even people with minimal or no symptoms who get infected are at risk for severe outcomes. We've seen the age come down of those who are hospitalized, but even more so we're hearing more and more about the long COVID wherein people who have not been immediately impacted by the disease may have chronic implications from having been infected, respiratory compromise, heart conditions, and most frightening as we're learning more and more is potentially chronic brain changes in the form of confusion, memory loss, mood changes. So I just want to also, I don't want to be overly dramatic, but I do want for people to understand that these are not insignificant impacts from a very serious disease.

I also want to address some information that's been coming to me on a regular basis and also is being put out through social media channels and being transmitted to lots of people in terms of impacts of the vaccine. As you know, there are quite a few people who are skeptical about the vaccine who are concerned that it may cause more harm than the disease itself. And so with that, I've been getting information about the large number of deaths, the large number of serious side effects that have been caused by this vaccine. And I'm here to tell you that that is inaccurate information if you come across that. And here's why, the VAERS system, vaccine adverse events reporting system is a national system that's been in place for a long time, with this disease, more so than any, with this vaccine, we are seeing great utilization of that system. So any required reports that might have gone unreported with an adverse event to a flu vaccine or a measles vaccine where you're seeing huge increases in the number of reports, those number of reports, however are just that, reports of something that happened to a person after they got the vaccine, be it, you know, a medical event or in many cases, even a death, that does not mean that the vaccine caused that outcome.

Whereas you may see that there are over 10,000 reports of deaths that have occurred after vaccination. Those are required reports for anyone who has died within a seven day period after a vaccine, regardless of why they died. Every one of those reports are completely vetted, reviewed by medical experts, communication with the person if it's a side effect, with the family if it was a death, with the medical providers, they are all reviewed. And with exceedingly rare exception, I'm aware of three cases that have had the notion of causation of death from a vaccine. Some of those rare blood clots we've seen, but nothing on the order of what people may be hearing in the hundreds, thousands of deaths and other significant side effects from the vaccine. You don't have to take my word for that. Please do your research, go to [vaers.com](https://vaers.com), learn about it, go to CDC, but we do not have a situation of vaccine causing significant impacts to the population. What we do have is significant impacts from the virus causing cases of disease, hospitalizations, and deaths. And so as you make your decisions and think about this, I ask that you get your information and put those in perspective.

So where are we with the vaccination efforts, which is our best tool to moving forward. So the state website includes a host of data pages now on that searchable by county. And as of this week, we've also added to our website percentages of fully, partially and unvaccinated people. This information will now be updated weekly. So what I can tell you is that as of today, or as of Monday, actually, 65.3% of the eligible population, those age 12 and older have gotten at least one dose of the COVID vaccine, 57.8% are fully vaccinated, that one or two doses plus two weeks. And with that, it is worth noting that we continue to fall further and further behind the state average, we're now nearly 10% off the state average. So again, messaging to our community is let us help you get to a safer place, get more information so that we can move forward together. The time is now and this is what we're seeing.

So other things that we're doing from public health to try to enhance that effort, to get more people, to make the decision that today is the day you're going to take the leap of faith and also look at the information and make your vaccine appointment. We are providing additional incentives to people to make that step. So at our three public health department clinics, during the month of August, we will be offering a \$25 gift card for each dose that you receive to anyone that makes an appointment at one of our clinics. This is as long as supplies last, but we do have an ample supply. We would love to run out of these gift cards, but they will be offered from a number of places from Home Depot, from Amazon, Grocery Outlet and Target. And we expect to have even more opportunities in the near term. We're also offering these gift cards at our mobile clinics. We've done over 60 such events with varying uptake in some of the communities that have been hardest hit by the disease and have the lowest vaccination rates. We've had some really wonderful recent successes with large turnouts in some of our bilingual and monolingual communities in geographic areas where we've seen less uptake. So we believe that these efforts of outreach and providing these incentives are working to some extent. Also we're providing the opportunity for refer a friend. So we will be drawing each Friday in August, a raffle at each of our sites where a hundred dollars will be awarded to anyone who gave their friend, their neighbor, their loved one information to go get a vaccine. And that person who made the referral will be eligible for that particular award of a hundred dollar value. So come in yourself, refer people. We are doing everything we can to try to move the needle, pardon the pun on spreading the love.

How do you go about making these appointments? Just a reminder, if you need assistance, there are many resources to help you. We continue to have our phone assistance center, but better yet is to go directly to [myturn.ca.gov](https://myturn.ca.gov). You will find appointments available there. If they are not on there, you can also go to [vaccinefinder.org](https://vaccinefinder.org). Some of the community pharmacies have that as the place you can make an appointment. Any of our appointments are at that [myturn.ca.gov](https://myturn.ca.gov). You also can get to that if you're familiar with our traditional web access, which is [recoverslo.org/vaccineappointments](https://recoverslo.org/vaccineappointments), you can get through to the My Turn app that way. And if you don't have access to the internet, I will again share the phone number where you can get an appointment made through a live person at 833-422-4255. I'll repeat that. 833-422-4255. In addition, we welcome walk-ins. If you want to avoid the whole appointment system thus far, we've been able to accommodate walk-ins. I would love it if we were overrun and had to revert to an appointment system, but at this moment in time, we are able to manage walk-ins. All sites are offering all of the different options, the J&J, the Moderna, the Pfizer, however, not at every site on every day. So that's another reason to really do your homework. If you want a particular kind of vaccine, you need to figure out which clinic, which day, which product is

being offered. Remember that if you plan to have someone vaccinated between the ages of 12 and 17, that only Pfizer is approved for use in that age group. So make sure you find a clinic time and date where Pfizer is being offered. We also continue to list on our website, all of these pop-up or mobile clinics each week at the [recoverslo.org/vaccines](https://recoverslo.org/vaccines). So if you want to stay more hyper-local in your community, we continue to make these clinics available in various places around the county. So check there for your latest list.

And finally, I am honored to share this podium today with some very special guests. These are people who have seen up close and personal, the impacts of this virus in our community. I want them to share their experiences as people moving about in the public sector. I mean, in the private sector, I'm sorry, they are on the front lines. And first I will introduce to you, Brent Burchett, as you heard, the executive director of the San Luis Obispo Farm Bureau, and he will be followed by our two local physicians with their own unique experiences, Dr. Joye Carter and Dr. Renee Bravo. And with that, I will turn this over to Mr. Brent Burchett, thank you.

- Thank you, Penny. Next year will be St. Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau's 100th anniversary, since 1922, we have weathered droughts, kinda like the one we're in now, floods, new regulations and volatile markets. If you were to ask a farmer or rancher, how do they persevere through such an uncertain way of life? A common response is this, worry about the things you can control. Forget about the rest. To our hundreds of Farm Bureau members and rural San Luis Obispo county residents. I would say this, this resurgence of COVID-19 is something we can control. This past spring, our Farm Bureau partnering with county public health team, local farm labor contractors, and incredible network of community outreach organizations to implement a successful farm worker vaccination project. This work still continues. And if you're an agricultural employer with new workers at your farm or people that want to learn more about the vaccine or hosting a clinic onsite, please reach out to the county or our Farm Bureau office for more information. What I've come to understand through all my years in agriculture is that what we eat is a very personal decision. What we choose to put in our bodies is driven by our values and our life experiences as much as it is about science. Skepticism is understandable. Questions are not stupid. And getting more information from reputable sources is a very important and rational thing to do. Take a break from information sources that affirm your beliefs, talk with your doctor and see if the vaccine is the right thing for you. For whatever it's worth, I am a very skeptical person and not a typical vaccine advocate, in both my professional and personal life, I'm highly distrustful of everything our government does. I got my first vaccine or shot on March 17th. And my second COVID vaccine shot on April 14th. Be not mistaken. Getting a vaccine is not an endorsement of any policy decision or thing that our local state or federal government has done during this pandemic. Getting a vaccine is not a political decision. It is a medical decision. We've lost leaders in our agriculture community to this disease. And while the cynic in me fears our message today will largely fall on deaf ears, if there's even just one person listening that will take another look and reconsider getting a vaccination, then our efforts today are worthwhile. With that, I'll turn it over to Dr. Joye Carter, forensic pathologists with SLO County Sheriff's Office.

- Good afternoon. I'm very pleased to be here. And my message today is to encourage citizens of San Luis Obispo County to get vaccinated, on behalf of your family, your friends and your coworkers. I received the vaccination in February of this year. My first shot and my second shot the last part of

February, and despite my work and hectic travel schedule, I have not had any interaction, any infection by COVID-19. I have stayed away from friends and family, have encouraged them to receive vaccines. And when El did, we were able to get together as family and friends. So I do encourage minority members of the population to consider that we are more prone to chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, atherosclerosis, effects from smoking that make us more susceptible to COVID-19. So I do encourage you to consider, to make a decision for your health and for those that you love and to use common sense when you're out, that the vaccine is available and can be helpful, but COVID-19 is not going away. It's just not going to go away by itself. So in a crowd, reduce your presence, wear your mask, keep your hand sanitation on top, keep your hands out of your face. And remember, this is a decision for your life. It's not about politics. It's about saving your life and those of your loved ones. So relax and vax. Next, Dr. Rene Bravo. Thank you.

- Good afternoon. I come to you as a pediatrician that's been serving children in this community for about 35 years and truthfully the last year and a half had been very, very challenging for us in the medical and especially the pediatric community. We were all excited to see the vaccinations as they enrolled at Christmas time and people were enthusiastic. They were getting vaccinated so much so that by June, I think we were all pleased to feel that this was diminishing. But sadly, that's not the case. We're seeing a resurgence that some of us kind of predicted at least in the unvaccinated, but it came much faster than we expected. In my office I see mostly children obviously, and I have had the privilege of now being able to acquire and deliver the vaccines to the teenagers. And my message today is really to those parents who are hesitant around about this, please, I just beg you, please get your teens vaccinated. Thankfully, we recognize that that is not a population that has high risk, but they do spread it. And there are complications that occur in teenagers that MIS inflammatory syndrome that they talk about. I've seen that. I've seen that, and you don't know which child, which kid, who's going to be that person. And so I don't want to take that chance. And I speak often to people who are hesitant, and I get you, I get your concerns and your fears. But I'll tell you COVID is not some obscure disease of a hundred years ago that we have the luxury of debating, whether we want to get the vaccine or not.

This is an epidemic and a crisis that's occurring now. We don't know where this is going to go again. And so I will tell you, we can argue about masks. We can argue about distancing, but we know that vaccination works. This is the tool that we have now to defeat this. And I think we can. And the other thing too is, this is a really important point that I'm trying make, be very wise and very careful about the information that you're getting out there, because the internet is not a great source of reliable information sometimes. And use that brain that you've been given. If it sounds crazy, it probably is. And I have seen things or heard things now that really have challenged logic for me. And this is too important a topic. We're talking about the future, the vulnerable, there are people that can't get this vaccine that we need to protect. So I tell you it's time now, get those teens vaccinated. When the children, when it's time for the children, we're going to look at that data and make those decisions also, but I also have a lot of confidence in our community. This is a good community. San Luis Obispo County has always been a good community. And I think it's time now that we all step together, get vaccinated, defeat this thing. Cause we don't want to go back to the lockdowns. We don't want to go back to the destroyed businesses. Kids need to go to school. They need that social interaction, they don't need to be isolated anymore and the door we have to walk through is vaccination. So I'm really imploring you at this point. Please, please, please get that. Thank you so

much. And I'm going to turn this over at this point to questions, is that correct? Before I stop, one more thing. I just want to say thank you again to Dr. Borenstein and the public health department. You guys are rock stars and heroes because I know that it's been very, very difficult in this last year and nobody thought two years ago, we'd be sitting here doing this and just on behalf of the medical community and all the patients that I see. Thank you for that, for the great work that you've been doing.

- [Man] I have a question on regarding vaccines. What are the medical conditions that would stop somebody from being vaccinated?

- Depending on your age, it's whether your immune system can take that and things and people that are taking immunosuppressive agents, for example, people on chemotherapeutic agents, those are primarily the ones that I'm scared the most about, there are kids on chemotherapy for example that can't get the vaccine. There are teenagers who have cancer in this community that can't get the vaccine. So those are the ones that we worry about. And so that would be at the top of the list. Anything that medically interferes with your ability to deal with infections or medications.

- I would like to just, I'd like to add to that. There's two groups. So we do very much worry about the people who are having immune problems by virtue of natural immunosuppressive conditions by cancer treatment, by, you know, other medications that might make the immune system vulnerable to a greater attack. Most of those people, in fact, I'm sorry to challenge my colleague, I think he would agree with me, can get the vaccine without incident, but we really worry about them in terms of the effectiveness of the vaccine. So while the effectiveness is very high for most people, it's those immune compromised people who might need a booster dose, who might, you know, not do as well with the vaccine as possible. The other group, there are a very small number of people who have true significant allergies to components of the vaccine and they can be evaluated as to whether or not any prior, very severe allergic reaction would put them at risk for this vaccine. So I hear from lots of people, you know, yes, I wound up at the hospital because of my peanut allergy or my bee sting or, you know, medication allergies, et cetera, for the most part, even those people are not allergic to this vaccine. So they may need more attention. They may need a longer observation period, but the vast majority of people can get the vaccine. If you are uncertain, please check with your physician. But you know, don't make assumptions about whether or not the vaccine is right for you, talk with someone. Yeah, sorry.

- [Woman] I have three questions. So the first one is something about a county is recommending residents to wear masks. Is SLO county going to do the same? Why or why not?

- So we certainly have been debating that for a period of time and has been the case in other dimensions of this pandemic. Sometimes, you know, we've preceded the state. Sometimes we followed the state, but right now the state has come out with a clear change in the guidance that mask wearing indoors, regardless of vaccination status should now be the norm again, that's why you see us wearing masks. You're all wearing masks. Thank you. We know that compliance continues to be an issue, especially, you know, in lots of public places, but that is now the rule in California, in our county as well, that mask wearing is part of the state order for anyone at this time indoors.

- [Woman] And do you plan any restrictions on businesses such as capacity reduction, closures, et cetera?

- So as you heard some of my colleagues say, Dr. Bravo in particular, the last thing we want to do, and you've heard me say this throughout this pandemic, it is not my goal to harm businesses. We want everyone to be able to, we want our economy to thrive. We want our businesses open. We want our schools open. We do not foresee having to go to some of those more really restrictive measures. I hope that we will not see a change in this virus to where it becomes that much more transmissible or deadly. So at this time we don't see this forthcoming in any way, shape or form. However, with everything in this pandemic, I try to make clear that never say never. What I hear a lot about over and over again is why do they keep changing the rules? And the real answer to that is the virus keeps changing how it moves through our community. So the scientists react to the virus's behavior, not the other way around.

- [Woman] I heard from community advocates that some residents do not have access to internet so they can make an appointment, they can not make an appointment on My Turn. So what can they do to make an appointment to get vaccinated against COVID-19?

- They can make that phone call. I will grab my piece of paper and read you that number again, I have it right here. Thank you. So if you don't have internet, you can make a phone call to get an appointment through 422-4255.

- [Woman] Dr. Borenstein, can you, the county, a couple of days ago sent out a news release talking about eight outbreaks of COVID county-wide. I noticed an outbreak in a local care facility looking at state data, but you also mentioned some sports teams. Can you share a little more information about that? Like what kinds of sports teams, are they school or they like the Blues?

- Yeah, so we had a white board. We still have white boards, but we were tracking every outbreak in our community. And that board was absolutely filled probably three months ago, outbreaks in every corner, our corrections facilities, long-term care, businesses, schools, clubs, et cetera. And we watched as that white board got emptied and we're now unfortunately, beginning to fill it again. We've had outbreaks in fire stations. We've had outbreaks in long-term care facilities. We've had outbreaks in youth sports teams, and those are the ones that come to mind, and our homeless shelter, I'm sorry, that's another big one we're struggling with right now. And so it feels like deja vu to us, and we're very sad that we're back in that place. We're getting right back on it. We're bringing more contact tracers back in, but you know, it is what it is. And we really feel very strongly that our pathway to not see that board continue to fill is to vaccinate.

- [Woman] Can you share any, I'm assuming that the cause of the outbreak would be unvaccinated people potentially, especially in long-term care facilities, it seems like it might be healthcare workers.

- So you saw from the state some recommendations for changes in health care facilities and other congregate facilities and requirements that are now in place. So it's not so much a vaccine mandate, but if you're not protected by virtue of vaccine and therefore not more likely to transmit the disease, then for those individuals, they need to wear a medical grade mask. They need to undergo testing so that we can continue to keep eyes on potentially silent transmission, asymptomatic transmission. So the majority of our cases, the majority of our significant cases, hospitalizations and deaths are

definitely among the unvaccinated. However, with this new Delta variant and how significant the spread is, so many people are being exposed. And with that even fully vaccinated people we are seeing in some cases are having breakthrough infection, the good news for them and the major difference is if you're vaccinated and you get infected is you are very unlikely to have severe consequences.

- [Woman] Can you elaborate? I think you mentioned the state, it's a state recommendation, right? There's no like, like there's no legal requirement or can you explain that a little more?

- It is in fact a state order. It is state public health officer order for presenting that verification of your vaccination status if you are a worker, this is only for the workers, a worker in an acute healthcare setting, like a hospital, like a skilled nursing facility, or even in an outpatient clinic. I turned to our providers in corrections, in homeless shelters, in our psych health facility. So we as a county who have many of these types of facilities, we are working toward meeting that new rule.

- [Woman] Sorry, I was talking about the masking rule for like going to the grocery or something.

- Oh, I'm sorry. Yes. Yeah. At this point, the state is recommending the indoor use of masks.

- [Woman] I have a question for you. We obviously talked about this huge increase in cases that we're seeing in the unvaccinated. Can you kind of elaborate more on maybe the age group that we're seeing that is getting those cases?

- So I don't have this off the top of my head in terms of cases. What I can tell you is a piece of information that got my attention, which is the average age of people who are hospitalized now in the state of California has dropped from an average age of 61 to an average age of 53. So we are seeing more younger people having to go to the hospital with this disease than we were previously.

- [Man] Is it possible that there could be extra variance happening even now?

- So while the percentage of all cases in the state of California that are being sequenced or genomically sequenced to identify what the strain of the virus is, that remains a relatively small percentage, less than 10%. I do believe that it is an adequate sampling of all the different cases of disease across the state, such that if there was any new variation that that would be found pretty readily. All right. Thank you very much.

- I'll just close with a few reminders. You can still get all our county's COVID-19 information on [emergencyslo.org](https://www.emergencyslo.org) or [recoveryslo.org/vaccine](https://www.recoveryslo.org/vaccine). Staff at our phone center can also answer your questions between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, at 781-5500. And just in case we haven't driven the message home enough. I'm going to share with you one more time, the information about how to get vaccinated, to make an appointment, please log into [myturn.ca.gov](https://myturn.ca.gov). And if you don't have access to the internet or just have trouble navigating that website, you can also call My Turn's phone number at 422-4255. Walk-ins are available at all three of our public health clinics in Grover Beach, Paso Robles, and San Luis Obispo. But please remember to check the when and where to get vaccinated tab on our [recoveryslo.org](https://www.recoveryslo.org) website for the details. Remember also that if you experience symptoms of COVID-19, there are still free COVID-19 testing sites available at San Luis Obispo Veteran's Hall and at Centennial Park in Paso Robles. For details on testing, the website is [emergencyslo.org/testing](https://www.emergencyslo.org/testing). Good afternoon. And thank you all again for tuning in today.