

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM. I'm Jim Burke, with local news and commentary for Tuesday, March 21, 2023.

Dr. Allison Berry, Public Health officer for Jefferson and Clallam Counties, spoke to the Jefferson County Board of County Commissioners yesterday, gave a report and answered questions from the commissioners and KPTZ listeners. She said that news of transmission and disease from COVID-19 is “relatively good,” and on the national level, cases, hospitalizations, and deaths are on a downtrend this week. We are down to 334 deaths per day nationwide due to COVID-19, but for reference, she added that number is about three times the death rate of a severe FLU season.

“Hanging steady” with relatively flat numbers across the state of Washington, she said, and that we did not see the surge due to the SBB 1.5 variant. Jefferson County Public Health reports the two-week COVID-19 case rate is 221 per 100,000 people, still in the high category. 32 new cases were added in the past week, so there have been 7,080 cases of COVID-19 since the pandemic began. Jefferson County Public Health staff estimate that 1 in 12 COVID-19 cases in Jefferson County were reported to public health last week. Over 2000 cases if we figure in that case ascertainment rate, but thankfully, Dr. Berry said we are not seeing a spike in severe disease related to the virus here. No one is currently hospitalized with COVID-19 in Jefferson County. There were no deaths this week. The total number of those who have died is 36 due to COVID in Jefferson County.

In neighboring Clallam County, we are seeing a case rate of 82 per hundred thousand, with a case ascertainment rate of 1 in 20. Two people are currently hospitalized, and no new deaths to report for a total of 164 deaths in Clallam County due to COVID-19.

Dr. Berry says that due to our high vaccination rates, with Jefferson County having one of the highest vaccination rates in the nation,” that is causing a decoupling of case rates and severe disease and deaths in Clallam, and especially Jefferson County. There are still risks from COVID-19, and people are more likely to get “long Covid” if they have multiple infections. “Since we do know that long covid is more likely to have multiple infections on top of each other,” Dr. Berry went on to explain in great detail the ways in which individuals can weigh risks and develop their own best practices for wearing masks in public settings.

She also had a delightful exchange with Commissioner Greg Brotherton about the “5 second rule,” in terms of dropping food on the floor. Where it’s dropped, how wet the food, and other things must be considered when picking something up off the floor and eating it.

On a more serious note, there was some discussion about the end of the emergency declaration nationally in June, the end of the mask mandates in healthcare settings on April 3, and how that will affect the availability of free covid tests, the wearing of masks in healthcare settings and other issues around the transition happening from the pandemic to the endemic phase of COVID-19.

Dr. Berry also said this about pregnancy and COVID-19 vaccine: “The other interesting piece of data that was recently released in the last week was a report out of the CDC showing a spike in maternal mortality in 2021. The large majority of that spike was actually driven by COVID-19 itself. COVID-19 remains very dangerous in pregnancy and increases the risk of maternal mortality. It also increases the risk of pre-term labor and miscarriages. The best thing you can do to reduce the risk of severe disease and all the negative outcomes related to COVID-19 and pregnancy is to stay up to date in your vaccines. Our populations over 65 are some of

the best vaccinated but some of our younger folks are not up to date on their vaccinations. So if you are in your reproductive years and thinking about getting pregnant, this is a good time to get up to date on your vaccines. If you are already pregnant, know that these vaccines are incredibly safe in pregnancy and much, much safer than the virus itself. We also know that if you get vaccinated in your second or third trimester, that actually can pass on protection to your infant from COVID-19. Our very young infants are the only group that are not eligible for vaccines, so this is a good way to protect that baby as well.

You can listen to Dr. Berry's full remarks, and a short discussion with Director of Emergency Management Willie Bence who speaks about resilience on the Olympic Peninsula in light of the Hood Canal bridge closures this summer, on our website, KPTZ.org.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and five Monday through Friday and at noon on Saturday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org. This is Jim Burke. Thanks for listening.