



## **Transcript of Press Conference**

**May 17, 2022**

### **Topic: Concerns about rising COVID-19 cases, what to do to prevent from getting sick, and what to do if you test positive**

**Dr. Jennifer Avegno:** I'm very sorry to make you guys wait out here in the heat. So, I'll talk fast and apologies. Got my notes but no podium. Thank you, guys, for coming out. This is really it's been a while, fortunately. And so really what this is mostly is an update.

**Photographer:** Step up close to the microphone?

**Dr. Avegno:** Oh sure, yeah, sure. Update, letting the public know where we are, what's happening with the surge that we find ourselves in now and where they can access resources. As you all know, because I've talked to several of you about it for several weeks, we've seen it seen a steady increase in the number of local COVID 19 cases, our percent positivity is increase and an overall rise in the COVID levels in our wastewater testing samples around the city. As of today, we are going to meet the criteria to move from the low-risk category to the medium risk category according to the CDC metrics. I will caution when you look on the CDC website, it's still gonna say low because they only update it once a week, but based on our daily counting, of the cases, we're very confident that we are now in that heightened level of risk. So, in Orleans Parish, as of yesterday, our average daily case count is 155. And that's about five times increase from a month ago. We're still doing a lot of PCR tests daily and that's what gets reported, but we recognize that most individuals are using at home tests. So, we know that total case count is a big under representation of the true burden of disease. We're using wastewater testing now and that's something we haven't had in previous surges. So, we've been able to see this coming and predict the rise in cases and mobilize resources more quickly than we have in the past. We're seeing that rise in wastewater in both our hospitality district and residential areas around the city. We have not quite yet seen it plateau and remember, wastewater predicts actual cases by a week or so, so we don't think we've hit the peak yet, and that's why we're here today. So, it's clear that the virus is circulating widely. And again, we want to just talk about some precautions to take so we can preserve health. We can preserve life we can preserve hospital and business capacity. We're not surprised at a summer surge. This is the third year in a row. But none of us want to have the surge we did last year with delta. So, we've got all the tools and I'm going to go through them. The good news is we are not seeing a strain on our hospital capacity yet. We know that hospitalizations from COVID tend to lag by a few weeks. But we think we have time at this point to get ahead of it and prevent that from happening prevent what happened last July and August when our hospitals were completely overwhelmed. So, we're going back to the basics. We're gonna talk about testing, masking vaccination, and now treatment which is something new. So, in terms of testing at this phase of the pandemic, we have multiple ways to test for COVID. We've got the broad wastewater testing, which is ongoing, but residents can still take advantage of individual tests on demand. For more than two years, longer than I think anywhere else in the country, we've enjoyed a robust PCR program testing program in New Orleans, the cornerstone of



which has been our National Guard testing thanks to the state, as well as Nola public schools really groundbreaking weekly testing of their students. Testing remains available around town and pharmacies, doctors' offices and pop-up sites. But the National Guard sites are closing at the end of this month. They have been deployed for a really long time. They are needed elsewhere. There are limited resources. And so, we want residents to prepare for that. And schools also are going to break for the summer. So, we're not going to have that that school testing data for at least a couple of months. So, there's still many ways you can get tested. You can go to the Nola ready testing site that shows you different locations around town also some pharmacies as well. You can also use a home test. Home tests are now readily available and have been for a while at many pharmacies and they are generally free with insurance, whether that's commercial insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, you should be able to get them reimbursed at pharmacies, so that's great. If you haven't done so yet, you can order tests through the federal program. I know a lot of people have done that, but some people haven't. That's still active and ongoing. If you caught one of our home tests at Mardi Gras, now might be the time to use it. Remember, if there's a QR code on the front of it, we just want to know what your results were. So, we appreciate you letting us know that.

To you continue our long-standing commitment to make sure that all New Orleanians regardless of where they live their insurance status, whether or not they have a doctor can receive the same level of equitable resources for the pandemic. We are continuing to partner with community groups all over the city who serve a wide variety of folks whether that's non-English speakers, or immigrants are those who would have real challenges getting to a pharmacy, getting a test. We've been partnering with them for a long time, our allocation of tests that we have in stock, we are going to again be distributing to them so that we can make sure we're getting to all the corners of the city. We're also expanding this access by equipping community health workers as part of our Office of Minority Health grant to directly distribute tests in areas that again might have challenges getting them otherwise so door to door in some cases. So, we are trying to make sure that wherever you are, whoever you are, you will have access to at least a home test. So, test early and often is what I will tell everyone in this surge if you've been exposed and many as many of us have, in recent days, tested immediately upon learning of the exposure and then test several days later. If you start developing any symptoms, anything from runny nose, sneezing, coughing, fever, body aches, I feel really tired, I'm having some stomach issues-- COVID can present in many, many ways. So, take that test, the sooner you know if you're infected, the fewer people you're going to infect. So then masking let's see Sabrina wearing her mask. Thank you. Wearing a high-quality mask has been proven to significantly lower the risk of viral transmission. And so, as we are sort of on the cusp in the middle, wherever we are in this surge, we're strongly recommending returning to universal broad indoor masking in public spaces. This is another way and we've used it very effectively in the past to protect yourself and your loved one from falling ill being out of work, spreading it to others. If we as a community can adopt short term, but widespread indoor masking again, we can get back to not needing a mask much quicker. I know many people might have stashed their masks away or threw them away in hopes we'd never need them again. That's okay, we got you covered. Once again. We're going to be partnering with some of our fire stations and libraries to distribute free masks to the public. Beginning tomorrow. You can pick up some masks, there'll be K and 90 fives or surgical masks at select fire stations and we'll have all this in a release, so you know where they are. They're the same fire



stations where you can pick up some Narcan if you would like that. And the library locations are coming shortly. So please consider wearing them anywhere that's indoors or crowded. And I want to stress this is not a mandate. But the more people do this, that's going to determine how long or short we stay in the surge. How many people get sick and how much business disruption we have. If we wear them for a short period of time, we will get back to normal quicker. In terms of vaccines and boosters, you know, it always gives me a lot of pride to say that New Orleans is the most highly vaccinated city in the state and in all age categories. We lead the national average. That's not by accident. That's not the work of one person. That's a tremendous achievement due to the work of all of our dedicated healthcare community and business partners. And we should be really proud. In the devastating delta and Omicron surges that really ravaged through our area, the death rate in Orleans Parish was considerably lower than neighboring areas and that's in large part due to us under level underlying level of protection. So, thank you all. So being up to date, and what up to date with vaccinations mean is that initial series, those two doses or the one J & J plus a booster is the best protection against severe disease, regardless of what variant we're seeing. Coronavirus traditionally, changes very, very quickly each new variant we see infects people both vaccinated and unvaccinated and we need to be honest about that. That is the nature of Coronavirus. Vaccinations are not going to prevent you from getting any infection ever. What they do is shorten your course, decrease the likelihood that you will be infectious to others for as long a time, and they decrease your risk of severe outcomes and death. And that's where we are at this phase right.

We need to get to the point where we're really focused, and we have been on what are the severe outcomes and how can we prevent people from getting them. Boosters give short term protection. As much as we would like this to be a booster that lasts for years and years. That's just not the way Corona viruses work. But they do give you that extra boost particularly for our elderly and highest risk and they are safe and well tolerated. So almost 50% of New Orleanians have received a booster that's a really good number. But if you haven't yet, or if you have and you're high risk and you got that booster in the fall, it's time for another one to give yourself that extra protection to get through this surge. There are many locations around the city you can still receive a vaccine, or a booster and they are free. And again, NOLA Ready has our vaccine and our testing locations. So now treatment, which we haven't talked a lot about in the past, and that's what gives me a lot of hope. Right now. If you do test positive you need to know what to do next. So, unlike previous surges, we have both oral pill form and IV treatments for COVID. I think everybody's familiar with a monoclonal antibody IV, but the pills are different and new. So, there's still one type of monoclonal antibody infusion that can be given to appropriate patients so your provider might recommend that for you. However, with oral treatments like Paxlovid, that's the most common one widely available now. This is going to be the best choice for many individuals who have mild or moderate symptoms. So, what's packs of it? It's a combination of two antiviral medicines that in clinical trials that were really well done, was shown to reduce the risk of hospitalization and severe outcomes up to 90%, in unvaccinated people, that is a huge, huge benefit; when you give it within the first five days of treat of symptoms. So, we think it works very well for vaccinated individuals to there's no reason why it should only work in unvaccinated not vaccinated. It's appropriate for most people with any one or more high risk conditions, and if you remember the high-risk conditions, it's a really wide range, it's anything from smoking, to cancer, to diabetes to high blood pressure to obesity,



so most people fit into one of those criteria. It is something that you have to watch if you have a history of kidney or liver disease, and it does have some potential interactions with some home medications. So, it should always be prescribed by a doctor after understanding your medical history first. I think in the beginning, when Paxlovid came out, there was a shortage and so a lot of folks just thought, well, this isn't available and even a lot of providers I think still might not realize that it is available widely and it's free. I want to stress that it is free. We're working really, really hard to make sure that everybody who needs it has access to it because we really see in this phase of the pandemic. This is a critical way to keep our hospitals going and to prevent the flood of patients and to sort of the breakdown of the system that we've seen in previous searches. I've had some recent experience with family and friends all over the country trying to get Paxlovid and have seen firsthand some of the barriers. So, this is another reason why we wanted to be here today to get the word out. How can you get it? if you test positive if you have mild to moderate symptoms, and you think you're in one of those high-risk categories. First of all, if you have a doctor or a health care provider or regular clinic, that's absolutely the first place to start. Call them. Make an appointment for a test if you're symptomatic and they can test you if you've tested positive on a home test. Call the office have a conversation with them. See what they recommend about getting Paxlovid. If you don't have a doctor or your doctor can't be reached as often happens, health care clinics are very busy these days, a backup can be a test to treat clinic. So, these are sites all over the country that are supported by the federal health system where you can make a quick appointment, get tested and walk out with Paxlovid if it's right for you. Right now, there's only two sites in New Orleans and it's not because they don't like New Orleans, it's because that's sort of how it is across the country. There just aren't that many settings however, I do want to highlight the sights. It's the CVS at the corner of Claiborne and Napoleon and DePaul community Health Centers. There is a website if you go to covid.gov it will take you to the test to treat site you can also call and we'll again we'll have this all on a release, but I'll just say it now 1-800-232-0233 to talk to somebody about where I can find a test to treat location. They it is translated into multiple languages if you're not an English speaker.

We know that two sites are not really sufficient. And we've communicated this to the feds, and they're hearing us. We're working really hard with state and federal partners as well as one of our local health systems to increase the access and ease of getting Paxlovid for more people in our community. So, I'm really hopeful that in the next few days we'll be able to announce something else. Because we know that having two sites that are not necessarily in the best geographic locations is not going to cut it for a lot of people. So, if you test positive in any setting for now, please talk to your provider or a provider. We're going to be most successful if we can just fight this war on every front. And I'll just close by saying you know, as of today, over 1000 individuals in the city have lost their lives to COVID. We're approaching if we haven't hit 1 million already, and everyone has been negatively impacted by this pandemic. In some way, shape or form. You know, the virus isn't going away. And we've got to anticipate future surges, but they can be ripples and not tsunamis. And that's what we're trying to do today is make this a ripple and not a tidal wave. All we have to do is take advantage of everything that we have and go back to the basics. You know, we've enjoyed a really refreshingly normal spring I don't know everybody felt that and I would love to enjoy a refreshingly normal summer with all the heat and humidity it brings. But



we just have to buckle down and be a little cautious now and I think we'll get there. So, I know that's a lot of information. I apologize, but I appreciate you giving me the opportunity.

**Public Information Officer, Casanova:** First were gonna take a question from Sabrina Wilson from WVUE and then WGNO, Payton LoCiero.

**Sabrina Wilson, WVUE:** "What should the average person take away from the medium risk COVID-designation?"

**Dr. Avegno:** "Yeah, it's just a heightened level of concern. We're not the only one. We've been tracking this all over the country. New York actually is moving from medium to high risk. And usually as you as we've been through this pandemic, they predate us by a couple of weeks.

I think it's putting a category on what we all kind of feel right. I bet everybody listening knows somebody right now, who has COVID. And many of them, at least in my experience, don't feel really great. They might not be in the hospital, but they're down for the count for a couple of days. So, this is just giving a name and a category to what we're all seeing. But I think it's an opportunity for us to just step back, take those extra precautions so we don't move to red because moving to red means that our hospitals are being impacted more severely and we don't want to get there."

**Payton LiCiero, WGNO:** "So you said that the hospitality district was showing higher numbers with the wastewater treatment. Does that mean that our tourists are crossing the state line and bringing it in, from other states from other cities? Is that something we should be concerned about? And what are y'all doing about it?"

**Dr. Avegno:** "So it's both **AND**, right. We're seeing increases both in the hospitality districts also widely in our residential districts, where many times tourists aren't going. So, I think we're seeing transmission locally. Not a surprise. We've all been out doing all the things for the last couple of months. Let's be honest about that. Whether it's festivals, whether it's graduations, whether it's weddings, whether it's parties, I think we've really embraced sort of our newfound freedoms and have been circulating kids are having more sleepovers, etc. At the same time our visitors are coming in from some from areas where the virus is been circulating even more highly than it has been here like the Northeast which is seeing the brunt of the surge the Midwest, and so sure, everybody's either bringing it in or kind of spreading it around. I know that our hospitality industry is very cognizant of this. They are taking steps. They've done a lot of due diligence to go through some steps that I think they're going to be announcing soon if they haven't already, to designate themselves as kind of a really safe place to be in terms of some of the protocols that they're going to be using. So again, if our residents and our visitors can just take those extra precautions, then we can mitigate the impact of transmission from whoever it's coming from.

**Health Allen, WVUE:** "How does that wastewater translated in numbers?"

**Dr. Avegno:** "Yeah, it's really not the numbers of the samples, right? The samples look at viral concentration, right? That particular number isn't super meaningful because each place we sample from



has a different amount of water coming through it right and a different amount of drainage. It's the trend that's important. And so, when we look at when we started, mid-February, we were just coming down off of the first Omicron surge, really high levels, and then they went way down. And we saw that we saw that through the last few months when we enjoyed very low case counts and very low viral transmission. Then we started to see it tick back up and tick back up. And we know that when it starts to rise, we can expect to see actual cases rising in the next week or so. What we are hoping for and looking for is when is it going to plateau. So, when are we going to say okay, maybe we're starting to see the beginning of the turn? We haven't quite seen that yet. And so that's why we want to really kind of double down and be extra cautious.

**Carli Berlin, WWNO:** "Is the city considering bringing back restrictions like masking, vaccine mandates and if so, what is the threshold? "

**Dr. Avegno:** "I at this point, no, we're not because again, we've got all the tools that we have had plus we have new tools in the form of our treatment. Plus, every time we have recommended precautions, an awful lot of people have followed them. So, I am confident that we will be able to get ahead of this without a mandate. I think everybody is really used to this now in a way that they weren't. So right now, that's not being considered.

**Emily Woodruff, The Advocate:** "So, New Orleans seems to be the epicenter, do you have an understanding why that is, the impact of Jazz Fest, any insight into that?"

**Dr. Avegno:** "Yeah, I think this started before Jazz Fest and I think number one, we are a densely populated city. Probably the most densely populated city. We are also continuing to do an awful lot of testing, right? If you're not testing, you're not seeing the outbreak and we have wastewater, which very few places across the state have that right. So, we know about this, and we're going to talk about this because we're testing for it. And again, I do think there's always we're always going to have an impact from people coming in and going right and why do people come in, they don't come in just to sit in their hotel room, right? They come in to be around other people. So, we're always gonna have circulation of people coming in and being in gathering in the city in a way that we don't see elsewhere. I do expect that the rest of the state and the region is going to see arise I think we're going to be first you know, why is New York always first for the same reason. And then it spreads to the rest of New York State to the rest of the Northeast. So, I do expect, and I hope that folks that are listening in other parishes consider these precautions as well. Whether they're coming to New Orleans or not, you know, the borders are porous. It's not just gonna stay here.

**Meg Farris, WWL TV:** "So Dr. Avegno, you said DePaul Community Health Centers."

**Dr. Avegno:** "Yep"

**WWL TV:** "There are several of them"

**Dr. Avegno:** "Yep"

**WWL TV:** "Are all of them test to treat?"



**Dr. Avegno:** "So if you call the number and again, we'll make that available to you. It's on the website. We'll make it available. If you call the number, they will figure out where's the easiest place for you to go? Because they'll make you an appointment and I talked to them yesterday. They assured me they can get next day, same day appointments. Which is great in many cases, although I said I might overwhelm them today. But if you call, you should be able to get an appointment at one of their locations and do test to treat and they've been doing this sort of quietly for the last few weeks and they say it's working really well."

**WWL TV:** "So it's more than two place. Is it all of the DePauls?"

**Dr. Avegno:** "It's I don't know that it's all of it. But I know that they have done that they have successfully done it in multiple locations. I think their main location is where they do most of it."

**WWL TV:** "so just there on Carrollton? "

**Dr. Avegno:** "Yeah."

**WWL TV:** "Cause they multiple locations, one in New Orleans East and one..."

**Dr. Avegno:** "Right. So, if you call, they should be able to help figure out where it's only one CVS though. Unfortunately, it's not all the CVS is and there's no other pharmacies participating as of yet."

**WWL TV:** "So it's that one CVS?"

**Dr. Avegno:** "Yes, on Napoleon and Claiborne's."

**WWL TV:** "And also, LCMC says the hospitalizations from covid in their six hospitals are low. Is it from the vaccine and natural immunity in the population and also because of the antiviral medication?"

**Dr. Avegno:** "I think all of the above I think we certainly do know there's a lot of natural immunity just from the Omicron surge, plus high vaccination rates, plus oral treatments but we want to keep it that way. 30% of the state's hospitalizations right now for COVID are in region one. So that's a little more than our population. So, we know we have a little more, they are very low. There are very few people on ventilators. And that's tremendous. But I'll tell you and I've seen this personally this round of the virus really knocks people out. It's not benign for a lot of people, old and young. And the more it spreads, the more likely we're going to get folks we're going to have bad enough courses that we get into the hospitals. So as always, we need to keep our hospital capacity open. Because we're still playing catch up from a lot of things that got delayed during the pandemic. So, we need to sort of give them some breathing room to catch up with us. Sorry, for the heat, y'all. Thank you. "

**Public Information Officer, Casanova:** "Is that it? Thank you for coming out. Appreciate it."