

July 14 COVID-19 Update from Dr. James Downing

Status: Recovery

Dear St. Jude employees,

We have made great strides in the past 16 months to protect our campus from SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The challenges have been numerous and difficult, but each of you has played a role in keeping our patients, families and employees safe.

Hundreds of millions of people around the world have safely received the COVID-19 vaccine. The benefits far outweigh the risks of not getting vaccinated. COVID-19 can cause serious illness and death even in young, healthy people. Many individuals have long-lasting symptoms after infection.

There has been tremendous progress worldwide, nationally and on our campus due to the remarkable effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine. Because the vaccines are so effective, we have modified some COMPASS safety precautions for masking, physical distancing and Kay Kafe access.

COVID-19 variants

Despite this progress, the COVID-19 pandemic continues due to a large number of unvaccinated people worldwide and the virus' ability to mutate. As a virus mutates and is passed from individual to individual, its genetic code changes. Such variations in the virus genome—or “errors” in the replication process—lead to the creation of new variants.

Four variants of concern are circulating in the U.S.: B.1.1.7 (Alpha), B.1.351 (Beta), P.1 (Gamma) and B.1.617.2 (Delta).

The Delta variant is quickly becoming the predominant variant in the U.S. and many other parts of the world. In Memphis and Shelby County, the Delta variant is now responsible for an estimated two-thirds of all COVID-19 cases. As a result, cases are increasing across Shelby County and a corresponding surge in hospitalizations is expected to follow. The Shelby County Health Department reported 914 active cases July 11, which is more than double the 453 cases reported the week before. The local test positivity rate has increased from 2.9% to 5.8% in the last week.

Data shows the Delta variant spreads more quickly, and there is concerning, early data that suggests its effects may be more severe than other forms of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These variants could continue as the virus has opportunities to spread, which is why vaccination is so important at this moment of the pandemic.

Vaccine mandate

I understand that some of you have questions and concerns about receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and may be reluctant to do so for various reasons. At St. Jude, we have a team of world-renowned researchers and clinicians who are happy to speak with anyone who is hesitant about receiving the vaccine.

As our mission states and as our St. Jude core values echo, we must ensure that advancing treatment for children with catastrophic diseases is at the center of everything we do. This means providing our patients and their families with the safest treatment environment possible.

To ensure we meet that mandate, we are requiring that all St. Jude employees be vaccinated against COVID-19 by Thursday, September 9.

We reached this decision after much research, analysis and discussion. It is the right thing to keep our campus safe. Our duty to our patients frames everything we do. This is the logical next step to ensure we stay one step ahead of the virus.

This time frame allows eight weeks for all unvaccinated employees to schedule appointments and to receive either the single dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine or the two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines. You must have your final dose scheduled and administered by the September 9 deadline. If you receive a COVID-19

vaccine outside of St. Jude, you must have the documentation to Occupational Health by the deadline date. In the coming days, I will provide details on the process to request a medical or religious exemption from vaccination.

By September 10, employees who have refused vaccination or do not have an approved medical or religious exemption will be put on an unpaid administrative leave for two weeks. During this time, they have the opportunity to begin the vaccination process. Those who fail to start the vaccination process will be terminated at the end of the two-week period.

How to get vaccinated

Data indicates that vaccination provides more than 90% protection from SARS-CoV-2 infection. The vaccines have been shown to be effective against the Delta variant and others.

Our vaccination process at St. Jude is quick and simple. [Sign up for a vaccine at St. Jude](#) or make an [appointment in your community](#). If you received a COVID-19 vaccine somewhere other than St. Jude, [complete this form](#) to let Occupational Health know your vaccination status if you have not already done so.

The vaccine section of the [COVID-19 pages on the St. Jude Intranet](#) is a helpful resource. If you have any questions, email askstjude@stjude.org. Your question will be answered fully and promptly.

With the highly contagious Delta variant spreading through our community, we must remain vigilant in doing our part to protect our immunocompromised patients. I want to once again acknowledge your hard work and dedication to our mission during the pandemic. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do each day.

Please share this information with your coworkers who lack access to St. Jude email but do not share it with individuals outside of the hospital.

Sincerely,

James R. Downing, MD
President and Chief Executive Officer
St. Jude Children's Research Hospital