

COVID-19 Cases on the Rise. A New Subvariant of Concern (XBB.1.5) Reported

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports an increase in COVID-19 infections throughout the nation. Most recently, XBB.1.5, a new Omicron subvariant of significant concern, has surged to represent 40.5% of all United States COVID-19 cases. This variant is noted to be highly transmissible. As of 12/31/22, 75.3% of Massachusetts COVID-19 cases were estimated to be the XBB.1.5 variant.

The COVID-19 vaccination series (primary series and bivalent booster) continues to be our best defense. People who are up to date, or received all eligible COVID-19 vaccinations, have a lower risk of severe illness, hospitalization, and death from COVID-19 than people who are unvaccinated or who have only received the primary series. Updated COVID-19 boosters can help restore protection that has decreased since previous vaccination.

Prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses by remaining vigilant and continuing to utilize the following multifaceted prevention measures supported by the CDC, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), and the Bedford Board of Health:

1. **Vaccination** - Receive a vaccine and/or COVID-19 booster as soon as you are eligible. Vaccinations for COVID-19 and flu are available, safe, and effective. Contact your medical provider for additional respiratory illness vaccination options.
2. **Testing** - Testing options are available to confirm respiratory illness. At-home test kits are available for COVID-19, and routine testing can help identify positive cases who may not have symptoms. Contact your medical provider for flu or RSV testing options.
3. **Mask Use** - Wearing a well-fitting face mask can help protect you and others from illness, especially if you or close contacts are at an increased risk for getting very sick. People may choose to mask at any time such as in large indoor gatherings.
4. **Distance** - Maintain physical distance and gather outdoors when possible.
5. **Ventilation** - Increase ventilation and air flow.
6. **Handwash** - Wash hands correctly and often, or use hand sanitizer when handwashing is not possible.
7. **Stay Home** - Stay home when you are feeling ill to avoid spreading illness. Remember to get tested if you are feeling ill.
8. **Clean & Disinfect**- Routinely clean and disinfect common touch surfaces.

As a reminder, the Town of Bedford offers free COVID-19 rapid antigen test kits for Bedford residents in four locations throughout Town buildings:

1. **Bedford Free Public Library** (Circulation Desk): Mon-Thu 9am-9pm; Fri 9am-6pm; Sat 9am-5pm; Sun 1pm-5pm.
2. **Council on Aging** (Town Center Building - Ground Floor): Mon-Fri 8am-4pm; Sat 10:30am-2:30pm.
3. **Health Department** (Town Center Building - Second Floor): Mon 8am-7pm; Tue-Thu 8am-4pm; Fri 8am-1pm.
4. **Town Manager's Office** (Town Hall - Second Floor): Mon 8am-7pm; Tue-Thu 8am-4pm; Fri 8am-1pm.

For additional information, please contact the Bedford Health Department at 781-275-6507 or visit: <https://www.bedfordma.gov/197/Health-Department> or <https://vaxfinder.mass.gov/>.