

## Key Takeaways:

- The Omicron Variant now represents a majority of active COVID-19 infections in the U.S. Preliminary data indicate that this variant is highly contagious but somewhat less severe than other known variants.
- A surge in infections is taking place across the nation; however, Idaho has fewer cases per capita than many states, and hospitals report no increases in COVID-related hospitalizations yet.
- The CDC has modified its recommendations for quarantine and isolation of COVID illness, shortening times for those who test positive and eliminating quarantines for exposure by vaccinated individuals; these recommendations will be enacted as policy on campus.
- Classes for the January term will be offered in-person as previously announced; however, in the short-term changes aimed at increasing safety will be made in the dining hall and some other campus venues.

Dear Members of the Yote Community,

We are writing to provide news and updates to COVID-19 policy related to the January term that begins this week. Like much of the past year, it's a mixed bag, with some good news and reasons for continued caution.

First, the good news: New findings about the transmission of COVID have led the Centers for Disease Control to modify policy recommendations involving those who have contracted the disease and those who have been exposed to the virus. The length of time required for isolation and quarantine have been shortened, and the requirement of quarantine has been removed entirely for exposed individuals who have been vaccinated and received a booster.

Specifically, the modified recommendations indicate that people with COVID should isolate for **5 days** if asymptomatic or if their symptoms are resolving (without fever for 24 hours), followed by **5 days of wearing a mask** when around others to minimize the risk of infecting people they encounter.

People who have been exposed but who are not ill fall into two camps. Those who are vaccinated and have received a booster **do not need to quarantine** after exposure to the virus, but should **wear a mask for 10 days**. For those who are unvaccinated or who are more than six months out from their second mRNA dose (or more than 2 months after the J&J vaccine) and not yet boosted, CDC now recommends **quarantine for 5 days** followed by **strict mask use for an additional 5 days**. These recommendations will be enacted as policy on campus for the January term; additional details and clarification can be found [here](#).

Now for the cautionary part: The anticipated winter surge has arrived with a vengeance, driven by the highly-contagious Omicron Variant, increased travel, and holiday gatherings. As a result, new daily infection records have been established over the past week across the country, and the rolling 7-day average is also a new high, surpassing the previous highpoint set in January a year ago.

For its part, Idaho is seeing an increase in new cases as well, with more than 3,600 new cases in the past five days and a rolling 7-day average of 330 new cases daily (though this is still well below the 7-day

average from earlier in the fall when cases were consistently over 1,000). Idaho's positivity rate dropped to 5.4% in mid-December, the lowest rate since last July, but rose to 8.4% in the most recent measure.

Some reassurance can be found in the fact that our state's COVID-19 hospitalization rates have dropped dramatically, and neither the St. Alphonsus hospital system nor the St. Luke's hospital system reports increases in COVID patients in relation to the winter surge. Idaho death rates are around one third of their peak in October and half the level during the surge in January of 2020.

The College of Idaho cases remain low, with two known case currently recovering in isolation off-campus; our trend has been low throughout the fall term, and all isolation facilities are currently available. Canyon County, in which the College is located, is considered to be in the low-moderate range, with 1.8 new cases per 1,000 people.

**In response to these developments, and given the travel and exposure by many members of our community over the holiday vacation, some short-term changes will be made in high-risk contexts on campus to minimize community spread.** Food service in the cafeteria will be grab-and-go and no dining will take place in Simplot in order to reduce unmasked exposure. In addition, the College encourages all non-academic groups to meet online only for the first two weeks of the term.

When proper precautions are taken, such as masking, social distancing, and use of seating charts, there is scant evidence to support classrooms being a source of infection; therefore, all classes will continue to be held in-person with these precautions in place.

Finally, we encourage everyone to obtain a booster shot as [supported](#) by the CDC. We also recognize the data on vaccination rates collected last summer and early fall are out of date; in addition, prior surveys did not inquire into boosters, which were not available at that time. As a result, we plan to proctor a new survey shortly to update information on these vital aspects of our community's ability to sustain in-person instruction in the coming terms.

As always, College leadership will monitor key metrics and adjust as appropriate in order to maintain health and safety and restore campus operations when prudent. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have questions or input.

Happy New Year to everyone, and safe travels to those returning to campus for the winter term.

Paul Bennion, Dean of Students

David Douglass, Dean of Faculty