

# HEALTH EDUCATION

## Important COVID-19 Update from Bernards Township Health Officer, Lucy Forgione

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bernards Township Health Department has done their part to respond and protect the municipalities within their jurisdictions. At the helm of effort is Health Officer/Director of Health, Lucy A Forgione. Spanning nearly 4 decades, Forgione's career has seen its fair share of public health events including H1N1, Ebola, and Zika but nothing quite like the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the past 2.5 years the world has been introduced to not only a novel coronavirus, but several mutations and variants that have caused a significant rise in cases worldwide. Summer and fall 2021, the Delta variant caused a spike in cases, and starting at the end of November 2021 Omicron began its reign as the dominant variant.

"In the United States, it would appear as though COVID is on a decline, but BA.4 and BA.5 have begun to change that", says Forgione. As of the most recent New Jersey COVID-19 Variant Surveillance Report, BA.4 makes up 13.3% of sequenced case, and BA.5 makes up 43.6%. According to the Centers for Disease Control COVID Data Tracker, BA.4 makes up 12.9% while BA.5 makes up 81.9% of cases. The earliest strains of the Omicron variant seemed to have faded to make way for BA.4 and BA.5. Why is this? "Mobility is increasing while mask wearing declines", says Forgione. "Vaccines are less effective at preventing infection from BA.4 and BA.5 with how much this virus has changed." It also appears as though previous infection from COVID-19 isn't providing immunity the same way it used to. Reinfection is also on the rise.

Other challenges include more people using at-home tests when they're sick and not reporting cases to public health authorities. "Our case counts end up being inaccurate and we are unable to offer public health advice and guidance to those who are sick".



Forgione encourages the public to still have faith in their vaccines and boosters at the moment. "Although the vaccines are less effective at preventing infection from the newer variants, they are still very effective in preventing severe illness and mortality". Vaccines are more readily available for various age groups and boosters are also able to protect those in vulnerable age groups. Anti-virals and other therapeutics are also available to those who are infected with COVID-19 including Paxlovid. "We are more equipped now to address a surge than we were earlier in this pandemic" says Forgione. As for tips to stay as healthy as possible this summer? "Get your booster shot if it's available to you, wear a mask in crowded public places, wash your hands and stay home if you're sick. We are prepared and ready. Stay well and we'll all be on the other side of this one day".