January 27, 2022

Dear Campus Community,

We were very pleased to greet students as they returned to campus this week. With an extensive set of public health protocols in place to manage the impact of COVID-19, we welcome the start of the spring semester.

Vaccination continues to be the best public health measure to fight COVID-19. While vaccines do not prevent all infections, they have proven to be very effective at preventing severe illness and hospitalization. Earlier this week, we conducted two large-scale booster clinics, and we will continue to provide convenient access to vaccines. The Public Health Promotion Center (PHPC) plans to conduct vaccine clinics each Thursday and Friday from 3 to 6 p.m. in the Campus Center. Walk-ins are accepted, but we encourage everyone to book an appointment.

This week we also distributed KN95 masks to departments, schools, colleges and residential halls across campus. Faculty, staff and students can also stop by the PHPC during operating hours to pick up two masks per person. We strongly urge you to use a high-grade mask, such as an N95, KN95 or KF94, or a double mask with a surgical mask under a cloth mask.

With the start of the semester, we have received some inquiries about testing protocols. Our approach to testing has been one of the most rigorous and effective aspects of the university’s pandemic mitigation efforts, and that commitment continues. With the development of vaccines over the past two years, our testing regimen has evolved to best address changing conditions.

Previously, the primary purpose of surveillance testing (testing everyone) was to identify individuals with COVID and isolate them from the community. In a vaccinated and boosted population, testing serves different purposes. We now employ a combination of more effective measures. These are especially valuable given how quickly the Omicron variant spreads, since the majority of people testing regularly are not identified as positive during their peak period of being contagious. Our current approach features continuous testing of wastewater on the scale of the entire campus, providing an accurate and real-time assessment of infectivity. Adaptive testing is then deployed to the populations showing increases in infectivity to identify individual cases. Meanwhile, convenient, unobserved voluntary testing is available and used regularly by the campus community. This comprehensive approach provides the PHPC enhanced tools to continuously analyze the state of the virus on our campus and enact real-time COVID-mitigation measures to keep
our campus and the surrounding communities safe. These testing protocols, employed in concert with our vaccination and masking policies, are designed to create a safe environment for all, including vulnerable individuals with medical conditions, and families with young children at home who are not vaccinated.

The latest COVID-19 testing data for the UMass community from Jan. 19 to Jan. 25 shows 191 new positive cases. The university’s cumulative positivity rate is 2.58%, down from last week’s rate of 6.33%. The state’s seven-day positivity rate is 10.37%. Most cases are of short duration resulting in mild-to-moderate illness, and there are no current hospitalizations.

Everyone must continue to monitor themselves for COVID-19 symptoms every day before coming to campus. If you feel unwell, stay home.

Thank you for all you are doing to care for yourselves and one another, and to support the health of our community.

Sincerely,
Co-Directors of the Public Health Promotion Center (PHPC)

Ann Becker, Public Health Director
Jeffrey Hescock, Executive Director of Environmental Health and Safety

University of Massachusetts Amherst