September 16, 2021

Dear Campus Community:

The Public Health Promotion Center (PHPC) is closely monitoring COVID-19 test results. We are encouraging the community to test, and the number of tests this past week more than doubled to 8,836. We also experienced a rise in positive results to 371. These numbers are concerning, and they should also be placed in the appropriate public health context.

Vaccinations provide the most effective protection against COVID-19, and at UMass 96.6% of our faculty, staff and students are vaccinated. Breakthrough cases are expected to occur within the university’s population of 29,300 faculty, staff and students. The COVID-19 vaccines have been developed with the goal of two outcomes: 1) reduce the rate of infection and 2) reduce the rate of severe illness. They cannot eliminate infection or illness completely. In addition, the use of indoor masks, required on campus and in the Town of Amherst, further reduce the spread of infection. Our data shows that among our vaccinated population, only 1.7% have tested positive. Among the approximately 500 individuals who have received religious or medical exemptions from vaccination, 10.05% have tested positive. We urge those not yet vaccinated to consider doing so. Vaccines as well as testing are free and readily available at the Public Health Promotion Center.

Meanwhile, given the significant rise in positive cases this week, the university is taking immediate action to begin adaptive testing to identify students who may be at risk of infection. Selected students, for instance in particular residential areas or social groups, will be asked to come in for additional testing so public health officials can better understand the transmission of the virus in our community.

We also strongly encourage everyone to enable MassNotify on your smartphone. This new contact tracing tool from Massachusetts Department of Public Health alerts users who may have been exposed to COVID-19. This will also supplement efforts of the UMass contact tracing team.

Additionally, the Off Campus Student Life office is conducting outreach through Good Neighbor program. All students who register an off-campus gathering are provided information, resources and support to make gatherings as safe as possible within existing restrictions. We are encouraging students to make connections, socialize and have fun, but to do so in ways that protect their community from spread.
Positive cases continue to be predominately among undergraduate off-campus students connected to un-masked social activities. We have not seen any spread in academic settings. Most cases continue to be of short duration resulting in mild-to-moderate illness. There was one hospitalization last week, and the person is home and recovering well.

Details about case counts and vaccinations can be found on the university’s COVID-19 dashboard, which is updated every Thursday.

Remember that the steps you take make an important difference. Please continue caring for yourselves and one another.

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