September 9, 2021

Dear Faculty and Staff,

The Public Health Promotion Center (PHPC) is closely monitoring COVID-19 test results. During the past week, we have seen an increase in positive cases mostly among vaccinated off-campus students. All cases have been of short duration resulting in mild-to-moderate illness and no hospitalizations.

The uptick in cases is predominantly among off-campus students and has been connected to indoor social activities, including visits to crowded downtown bars and attendance at parties. While there is presently no university prohibition on students gathering to socialize, we are re-enforcing the message to students that masks should be worn at indoor gatherings and while the safest place to gather is outdoors, even there, masks should be worn when social distancing is not possible. The decision has also been made to cancel campus-organized, student game-day football activities in lot 11, next to McGuirk Alumni Stadium this Saturday. With virtually the entire UMass community vaccinated, responsible mask wearing and avoiding indoor un-masked crowds are critical additional steps we must all take to protect ourselves and those around us from breakthrough infections.

In a near-fully vaccinated population such as ours, positive tests results are predominantly breakthrough cases. The hospitalization rate in Massachusetts among breakthrough cases is just 0.02%, and on our campus, there have been no COVID-related hospitalizations to date. The vaccines are working as designed — they prevent severe illness and hospitalizations. While in our planning process we anticipated case numbers in the range we are seeing this week and have prepared for it, we nonetheless are concerned about any increase in cases. For this reason, we ask you to please continue to do your part to ensure the health and wellbeing of every member of the UMass community. If we wear our masks indoors, limit contacts and avoid crowded, un-masked indoor gatherings, we will all enjoy a rich and rewarding semester and avoid some of the more onerous restrictions endured last year. Details about case counts and vaccinations can be found on the university’s COVID-19 dashboard, which is updated every Thursday.
All campus community members should use this COVID-19 Symptom review every day before coming to campus. **If you feel unwell, don’t come to work and get tested.** Positive cases may initially present as allergies or a mild cold. Meanwhile, as we maintain vigilance in our efforts to protect the public health, the current campus indoor masking requirement will remain in effect indefinitely.

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