



President Tim Sands updates Blacksburg campus on COVID-19 status

The start of the fall semester has reminded us of the value of in-person learning in our instructional spaces and in our living communities. It is especially gratifying to once again see hundreds of students cross the Drillfield during class changes. The seismic event in Lane Stadium for our football season opener underscored what we have missed during the pandemic – the indelible value of shared experiences.

It's good to be back, and to come back strong. Although the pandemic still has the potential to change our status, we have good evidence that your vigilance in observing public health policy and guidance made it possible for us to start the semester with a degree of confidence and optimism.

I know that most of our community members follow our COVID dashboard, but I think it is also important to provide context, share what we have learned so far, and offer some possible scenarios going forward. I appreciate the sacrifices you have all made to allow a full-scale reopening, everything from vaccinations to testing to masking in indoor public spaces. For some in our community, including the immunocompromised and those who live with unvaccinated individuals, the threat of COVID-19 is ever-present. Our high vaccination rate is making a difference, but we know that the threat will loom until the pandemic has subsided in our communities and across the globe.

Here is what our data and the evolving science tell us about the status of COVID-19 in our Blacksburg campus community:

- Our mitigation measures are working. From the first day of classes on Aug. 23 through Sept. 17, the total number of positive tests recorded by Schiffert Health Center on Virginia Tech's Blacksburg campus was 158. This is 19 percent of the 823 cases recorded over the same period in fall 2020, a time when the virus was much less transmissible than the current Delta variant.
- Vaccines are making the difference. The vaccination rate of the total population of students and employees, some 45,000 individuals, is 96 percent. Of the 139 positive tests from students since the start of the semester, about 40 percent were among the small percentage (<5 percent) of students who were not fully vaccinated. Thus, our data indicate that unvaccinated Virginia Tech students are more than 15 times more likely to test positive than fully vaccinated students.
- Our outdoor events have not been associated with an increase in COVID-19 incidence. We

estimate that 17,000 Virginia Tech students and thousands of Virginia Tech employees were in attendance at our first football game on Sept. 3. As of Sept. 17, the seven-day average of daily positive cases on our campus was 4.7 and the seven-day average of positivity was 1.0 percent, compared to 8.1 positive tests/day and 2.3 percent positivity on Sept. 3. In the broader Blacksburg community, the New River Health District reports that average daily positive test numbers changed from 85 to 106 over the same period. New River Health District Director Noelle Bissell has verified that there has not been an increase in reported cases ascribable to Virginia Tech's football home opener on Sept. 3, nor have we seen evidence of transmission at other large outdoor events.

These data and observations are encouraging, but we must remain vigilant. We look forward to the day when we can relax the remaining restrictions and ease back toward a more comfortable and "normal" experience on our campuses and in our communities. We will continue to monitor the data and adapt to the evolving guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It has taken a commitment across the Virginia Tech community to get us to this point. Thank you for making it possible for all of us to enjoy the Virginia Tech experience this semester, and for taking care of yourself and those around you. Be Committed. Be Well.

COVID-19 panel livestreamed Friday

Virginia Tech will host a COVID-19 panel this Friday, Sept. 24, at 9 a.m. The panel will consist of Noelle Bissell, director of the New River Health District; Lee Learman, dean of the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine; and Paul Skolnik, an infectious disease physician with Carilion Clinic.

Flu season is coming; protect yourself and others with a flu vaccine

Thank you to all of the members of our community who have received their COVID-19 vaccine. Your commitment to your health as well as the health of your family and others in the community is a critical part of the fight against COVID-19.

While fighting the pandemic continues to be an important focus, fall is the time when other respiratory illnesses, like flu, begin to spread. It's important that we all take the necessary steps to reduce the spread of these seasonal illnesses too. That's why Virginia

Tech is encouraging all employees and students to get a flu vaccination.

Hokie Wellness flu vaccine clinics: As a service to all employees, Hokie Wellness offers flu vaccination clinics each fall. The clinics are for employees only to limit the number of visitors on campus. Families/dependents of employees may be vaccinated at the drive through clinic on Oct. 30; see below for more information.

- Salaried faculty and staff who are covered by state health insurance plans must show their insurance card to receive a free vaccine.
- Non-student wage employees may also receive a free flu vaccine at the clinics by showing their Hokie Passport.
- Salaried F&S who are not covered by state health insurance plans may receive a flu vaccine at the clinics; be prepared to pay \$25 by cash or check at the clinic.

Flu vaccination clinics begin Oct. 5 and run through Oct. 30 at locations across campus. Registration is required for the flu clinics. Please be aware of the following:

- Because the flu clinics will be held in indoor public spaces, masks will be required to be worn and attendees will be asked to maintain physical distancing.
- Individuals who feel sick, are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 should not attend the event.
- Injectable flu vaccines will be available at these clinics.

Following is information on the clinics:

- North End Center: Oct. 5, 12, 26, & 28, 8 a.m. – 2:30 pm.
- Steger Hall: Oct. 6, 13, and 27, 8 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
- North End Center – drive through clinic: Oct. 30, 9 a.m. – 1 p.m.; Families/ dependents of employees may attend this clinic.

NOTE: The registration link found at <https://vtx.vt.edu/notices/2021/09/hokie-wellness-flu-clinics-2021.html> contains specific information about each clinic.

Other ways to get a flu vaccine: If you are unable to make it to a Hokie Wellness clinic, vaccinations are also available at most local pharmacies and through health care providers.

State health plan members may get a free flu vaccine at pharmacies participating in their health plan's network.

- COVA Care, COVA HDHP, and COVA HealthAware members may receive flu shots at no cost from network physicians' offices and other participating providers.
- Kaiser Permanente HMO members must go to a participating Kaiser medical center.

Contact your health plan provider if you have questions about your benefits or for information on receiving flu vaccines from non-network providers or pharmacies. If you plan to get your flu vaccine at a pharmacy, be sure to call ahead to confirm the pharmacy is participating in the program and that shots are available. An appointment may be required.

Vaccination is the best protection against contracting the flu. For more information about the flu from Virginia Tech, visit our flu information page at <https://vt.edu/flu.html>.

Virginia Tech News is published weekly during fall and spring semester and bimonthly during the summer sessions, by the Division of Human Resources and the Office of University Relations as a service to university employees who do not have computer access on campus. For more information, or to discuss submission of items call 540-231-3852.

For questions:

- About Hokie Wellness flu clinics, contact Hokie Wellness at hokiewellness@vt.edu or 540-231-8878.
- About flu vaccines and your medical plan, contact your plan provider.
- From students about the flu, contact Schiffert Health Center at health@vt.edu or 540-231-6444.

Employee COVID-19 vaccination deadline is Oct. 1; mask requirements remain in effect

In the university's continuing effort to ensure the health and safety of our campus communities, both students and employees of Virginia Tech are required to get the COVID-19 vaccination or receive a vaccine exemption because of a medical condition or sincerely held religious belief.

Virginia Tech employees, including full- and part-time faculty, staff, and wage in all Virginia Tech locations, have until Oct. 1 to receive and report their COVID-19 vaccination (<https://policies.vt.edu/assets/ppm%20317.pdf>) or file for a vaccination exemption (<https://oea.vt.edu/ada-accessibility-services/resources/covid-vaccine-exemptions.html>) with Virginia Tech's Office for Equity and Accessibility.

Thank you to the nearly 90 percent of employees who have reported their vaccination information to the university. Employees who have a vaccination exemption are required to participate in weekly surveillance testing. Additionally, until an employee provides a record of their vaccination information and are fully vaccinated (two weeks following final dose), they will be required to participate in weekly testing. No exemptions will be granted from testing. Information about the testing program and frequently asked questions are available on the Virginia Tech Ready site at <https://ready.vt.edu>.

Failure to receive the vaccination and report vaccination information or file for an exemption by the Oct. 1 deadline will result in disciplinary action up to and including termination. For detailed instructions on how to register vaccination information, visit <https://ready.vt.edu/vaccinations.html#instructions>.

As announced on Sept. 14 (<https://vtx.vt.edu/notices/2021/09/unirel-mask-requirement-september.html>), mask requirements for indoor spaces remain in effect. After a thorough review of public health data including high transmission rates in the New River Valley and across Virginia, and consistent with the advice provided by local and state public health officials, Virginia Tech has extended its proper mask use requirement (<https://vtx.vt.edu/articles/2021/08/unirel-mask-requirements.html>) by all individuals, regardless of vaccination status, when indoors in designated public areas until further notice. Unvaccinated individuals are required to wear a mask at all times when in university owned or leased facilities.

Questions on vaccination requirement, how to file for an exemption, testing, or the university's mask requirement, contact your college or department's HR representative.