



Avoid holiday gatherings if you're sick, other tips for COVID-19 safety this season

The number of people testing positive for COVID-19 is rising in the New River Health District, and that's likely to continue through the rest of December, topping off the holiday season and new year.

Though omicron, the newest coronavirus variant, hasn't yet made its way to the region, Noelle Bissell, the district's health director, expects that it soon will come. That, plus the large number of people who will travel and gather for the holidays, likely will push case counts higher.

Currently, the district is reporting up to 350 COVID-19 positive cases a week, she said on Dec. 20 during a meeting with news media.

Still, though omicron is more contagious, it appears to be less serious than other variants, based on reports of the disease in other countries.

The COVID-19 vaccines are effective at preventing hospitalization, serious illness, and death from these variants, Bissell said. But there is an increased chance that people will contract the coronavirus, even those who are fully vaccinated.

"As omicron is so much more contagious, more people are going to get infected," Bissell said.

Follow these tips from Bissell and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for safe holiday celebrations:

- Get vaccinated. Even if you're not fully vaccinated in time for a holiday gathering, a first dose of the vaccine does provide some immunity.
- If you have been vaccinated, get your booster. All individuals aged 18 and older are eligible to receive a COVID booster. If you are at least six months past your first vaccination date for Moderna or Pfizer, or two months past your vaccination date for Johnson & Johnson, get a booster as soon as possible.
- Wear a mask in public indoor settings if you're not fully vaccinated, have a weakened immune system, or are in a high transmission area.
- Avoid crowded, poorly ventilated spaces, such as basements. Open windows to increase air circulation.
- Take celebrations outdoors.
- If you are sick or have symptoms, do not host or attend holiday gatherings.
- Practice good hygiene by washing hands

frequently.

- Be cautious about COVID-19 exposures before attending a gathering. Avoid crowded indoor spaces and other high risk activities.
- Consider taking a self COVID-19 test before spending time with family and friends.
- Everyone, regardless of vaccination status, is required to wear a mask on public transportation and to follow international travel recommendations.

What to do if you become infected with COVID-19:

- Isolate in your home, away from family members if possible. Do not leave your home except to receive medical care.
- Take over-the-counter medications if needed, such as pain relievers, antihistamines, and cold medicine.
- Get rest and stay hydrated.
- Wash your hands regularly.
- Wear a mask over your nose and mouth if you must be around people or animals.
- Talk with a physician if you are older or have other high risk factors.

To get the vaccine or booster, go to one of the Health Department sites listed on <https://www.nrvroadtowellness.com/where-to-get-vaccinated>, visit a local pharmacy, or find a vaccine through vaccinefinder.gov.

Voluntary retirement plan contribution limits for 2022

Virginia Tech employees have many retirement plan options, including voluntary plans such as the university's 403(b) Tax Deferred Savings Plan and the Commonwealth of Virginia's Deferred Compensation 457(b) Plan.

All Virginia Tech employees (including adjunct faculty, wage, and student wage) are eligible to participate in one or both of these voluntary plans, which provide additional ways to save money toward retirement. Contributions can be made through pretax or after-tax (also called Roth) payroll deductions. Employee contributions and any applicable matching employer contributions in your 403(b) and 457(b) plans are immediately 100 percent vested.

Below are the 2022 IRS maximum annual limits for contributions to a 403(b) plan and a 457(b) plan:

- Under age 50: \$20,500
- Over age 50: \$27,000, with the \$6,500 age catch-up

If you wish to enroll, or are already participating and wish to make changes to current contributions, the following links provide access to additional information:

- 403(b) Plan: Complete the Voluntary 403(b) Retirement Contribution Election Form and submit the form to the HR Service Center. Learn more: <https://www.hr.vt.edu/benefits/retirement/voluntary-retirement-plans.html>
- 457(b) Plan: Contact the plan provider or by calling 1-877-327-5261. Learn more: <https://www.hr.vt.edu/benefits/retirement/voluntary-retirement-plans.html>

For more information about Virginia Tech's retirement plan options, contact the HR Service Center at 540-231-9331.

Information session for LiveHealth Online, telehealth service for Anthem COVA Care members

Hokie Wellness invites Anthem COVA Care Members to attend an information session on LiveHealth Online, a robust telehealth platform that provides Anthem members access to a variety of medical professionals including board-certified physicians, licensed therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, allergy specialists, and more.

The information session will be held virtually on Thursday, Jan. 20, from 12-12:30 p.m. Attendees will be guided through a demonstration of the online platform and invited to ask questions. Registration is required at <https://virginiatech.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUkcuCqqT0jHdCKDngRAGjXdAt5Cb9wMN6p>.

Benefits of LiveHealth Online include access to visit with a physician 24/7, minimal wait times for counseling appointments, and the ability to access care virtually from any location within the United States. All co-pays for LiveHealth Online services are currently waived for Anthem COVA Care members, making these telehealth services both convenient and budget friendly.

If you are an individual with a disability and desire an accommodation, please contact Lauren Shelor at 540-231-5142 or email lauren44@vt.edu at least seven business days prior to the event.

Hokie Wellness serves Virginia Tech to foster a healthier community by providing prevention services, education, outreach, and resources to employees and students. If you have questions, need assistance, or want to join the Hokie Wellness Google group to stay up to date with monthly updates, contact the team at hokiewellness@vt.edu.

Employees and students encouraged to report booster shot for COVID-19

As mentioned in the Dec. 10 community letter from Vice Presidents Frank Shushok Jr. and Bryan Garey (<https://vtx.vt.edu/articles/2021/12/studentaffairs-hr-shushok-garey.html>), the university would like to understand how many

students and employees who previously reported COVID-19 vaccination information have since received a booster shot. Both the student and employee reporting systems can collect booster information.

- Students: For instructions and to report booster information, visit https://students.vt.edu/vaccination_reporting.html
- Employees: For instructions and to report booster information, visit <https://www.hr.vt.edu/resources/0/vaccine-reporting.html>

Thank you in advance for reporting your booster information. Please keep in mind that the university may require in the future that students and employees receive and report boosters should we see a rise in cases or serious threat of illness in our communities, but at this time boosters are not required.

The best defense against COVID continues to be vaccination. If you haven't already received one, there are proven results that vaccination prevents serious symptoms, hospitalization, and death.

If you have been vaccinated, get your booster. All individuals aged 18 and older are eligible to receive a COVID booster. If you are at least six months past your first vaccination date for Moderna or Pfizer, or two months past your vaccination date for Johnson & Johnson, get a booster as soon as possible.

To get the vaccine or booster, go to one of the Health Department sites listed, visit a local pharmacy, or find a vaccine through vaccinefinder.gov.

Reminder to employees: Plan now to use your annual leave

As a reminder, the last day to use your accrued 2021 leave is Jan. 9, 2022. Information about leave carryover limits for different positions is available on the HR Leave website at <https://www.hr.vt.edu/benefits/leave.html>. For more information on Virginia Tech holidays please refer to University Policy No. 4315: Guidelines on Holidays.

Questions about leave and leave usage? Please contact your college or department's HR representative or contact the HR Leave Team at hrleave@vt.edu.

University is closed from Thursday, Dec. 23, through Friday, Dec. 31, 2021, and reopens on Monday, Jan. 3, 2022. The following days are designated holidays for eligible faculty and staff: Thursday, Dec. 23; Friday, Dec. 24; and Friday, Dec. 31. You do not need to use annual leave on these days.

Editor Note: Holiday Blackout

The Blue Sheet newsletter will not be published Dec. 29 due to winter closing. The newsletter will resume Jan. 6.