

Recommendation on masking with widespread Delta variant

The Greater Northwest Area's COVID-19 Response Team strongly recommends that all congregations in Option 2 require members and guests to wear masks indoors in public settings like worship, without regard for vaccination status. Mask wearing remains a default practice for local churches and ministries operating within Option 1 of the GNW's "[Stepping forward safely in love and trust](#)" framework.

This week, [the CDC updated its guidance for fully vaccinated individuals](#) recommending mask usage indoors in counties with high or substantial virus transmission. This change, along with appeals for much the same from several public health officers across the region, emphasizes the importance of this recommendation.

As we continue to monitor risk across the Greater Northwest Area, we have seen a dramatic increase over the last three weeks. On July 5, 92% of our ministries were at low to medium risk, according to data at [CovidActNow](#). As of July 26, 69% of our churches are now in counties categorized as high risk or worse. All of the progress made in our communities since "Stepping Forward..." went into effect on May 17 has been eroded, and leading indicators are not yet projecting a leveling of this trend toward higher risk.

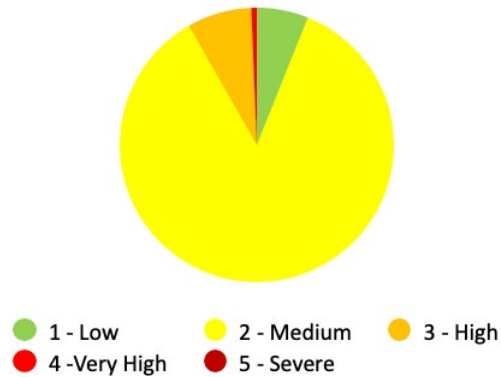
There is emerging evidence that the Delta variant is quite effective at breaking through the layer of protection vaccination provides, though it most often results in milder cases with few leading to hospitalization or death. It is also the case that unvaccinated individuals are less likely to wear masks when they are no longer required of vaccinated people, effectively putting them at greater risk, even if it is a choice they are making.

The Delta variant is the dominant strain of COVID-19 across most of the United States. Exponentially more contagious, it is taking advantage of relaxed and abandoned COVID-19 safety measures to drive up infections nearly everywhere, hitting even harder those communities with lower vaccination rates.

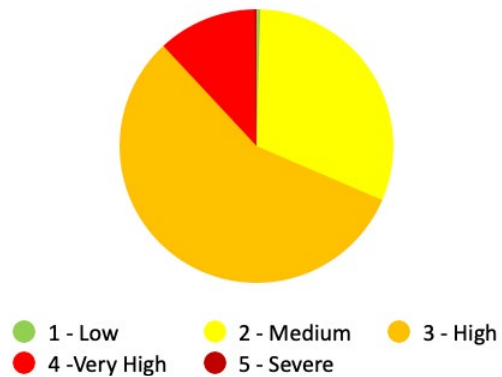
The impact of the Delta variant

Over the past three weeks, the emergence of the Delta variant, changes in personal behavior and the rolling back of safety measures by state and local governments have conspired to disrupt the important progress we had been making.

GNW Area COVID-19 Risk - July 5, 2021



GNW Area COVID-19 Risk - July 26, 2021



Conference-level versions of this same chart can be found on the following page.

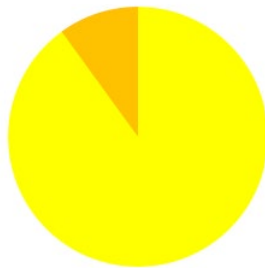
Additionally, there is growing concern that the effectiveness of vaccinations wanes after around six months. The New York Times reported this week that the Biden Administration is actively exploring offering booster shots to [“people who are 65 and older or who have compromised immune systems.”](#)

It remains the case that there is much we do not know about this virus. This is even more the case with variants that emerge with different characteristics and symptoms. Continuing to use caution, offering respectful encouragement of vaccination with those who remain hesitant, and using the simple tool of a face mask are effective ways to love our neighbors.

The impact of the Delta variant, loosening restrictions and changes to personal behavior over three weeks

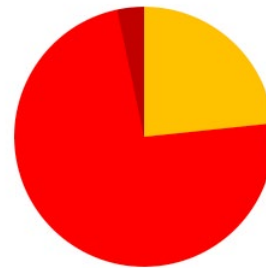
ALASKA

July 5



1 - Low 2 - Medium 3 - High
4 - Very High 5 - Severe

July 26



1 - Low 2 - Medium 3 - High
4 - Very High 5 - Severe

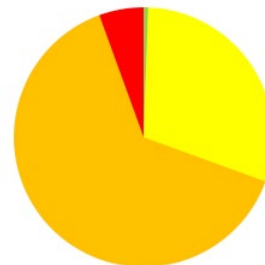
OR-ID

July 5



1 - Low 2 - Medium 3 - High
4 - Very High 5 - Severe

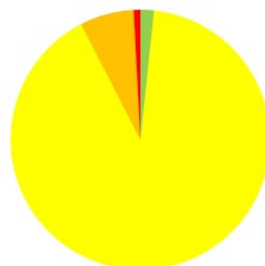
July 26



1 - Low 2 - Medium 3 - High
4 - Very High 5 - Severe

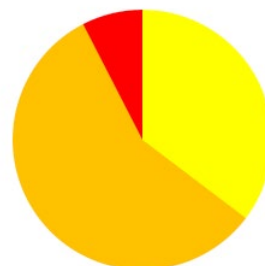
PNW

July 5



1 - Low 2 - Medium 3 - High
4 - Very High 5 - Severe

July 26



1 - Low 2 - Medium 3 - High
4 - Very High 5 - Severe