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## 'We're Surging on St. Croix Right Now,' Dept. of Health Says as Island Records 62 New Cases in Past Week

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The V.I. Dept. of Health on Friday held a press briefing to address what it said was surging Covid-19 cases on the island of St. Croix during the week beginning March 12-18. The department said there were 81 new positive Covid-19 cases territory-wide during that time, with St. Croix accounting for sixty-two to St. Thomas's nineteen. During that time period, 2,001 people were tested, which brought the territory's seven-day positivity rate to 4 percent.

D.O.H. Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis described the recent spike in cases as "alarming," and encouraged Virgin Islanders to take any of the three vaccines available in the territory: the Moderna, the Pfizer or Johnson & Johnson vaccine, the latter which only requires one dose compared to the two doses needed for the Moderna and Pfizer shots.

Dr. Ellis said the new spike in cases are linked to persons who remain unvaccinated. "If you are not fully vaccinated you cannot take your guard down at this time," Dr. Ellis said. "The recent increase in new cases is a reminder that you must be vigilant when you're outside your household, especially if you live with someone who is immunocompromised or elderly." She encouraged residents to continue wearing masks, washing hands and social distancing, adding, "The quicker we can get the territory vaccinated, the quicker we can get past this very long year."

D.O.H. Medical Director, Dr. Tai Hunte-Caesar, was blunt. "Bottomline is we're surging right now on St. Croix. It is extremely difficult to get a handle on the management of this infection when it really just impacts a tremendous amount of people without any discrimination," she said.

Dr. Hunte-Caesar said she's witnessed a variety of complications at the Juan F. Luis Hospital from Covid-19 patients, including those "starving for air, short of breathe and coughing... ranging of ages 25 and upwards to 80 years old. So we know that the elderly and those with comorbid conditions are at risk, but we're seeing people who don't necessarily have many risk factors also being affected tremendously by this infection." She said the increase in hospitalizations stresses the territory's already strained healthcare system.

The territory's vaccine centers, which opened on March 1, have administered 6,494 vaccine shots to date, said Dr. Ellis, which does not include numbers from multiple other vaccination sites across the territory at private and public facilities. "The territory's on track to meet or exceed the governor's goal of at least 50,000 vaccination shots provided by July 1," said Dr. Ellis. According to the CDC, vaccinated people can gather in small groups without masks or social distancing, [among other freedoms](#).

Covid-19 variants remain a cause for concern in the territory, though there has been none detected in the territory by D.O.H. from the twenty-two samples the department has sequenced. D.O.H. said it continues to collect more Covid specimens for sequencing.

"At least one variant has been detected as close as Puerto Rico, and these variants are expected to be the predominant virus in the USA by the end of March," said Dr. Ellis, who along with Dr. Hunte-Caesar conducted the press briefing Friday. The variant [detected in Puerto Rico](#) is the highly contagious United Kingdom strain.

"It's still possible that the variants are already here but we have not detected them," she said, adding that the department will continue to be vigilant and conduct contact tracing "if and when a variant is detected."

The Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center reported having three Covid-19 patients, with one on a ventilator, while the Schneider Regional Medical Center reported one patient ill with Covid-19 who was also on a ventilator as of Friday.

In some positive news for the Dept. of Health, a CLIA inspection was recently conducted and the department passed with high marks, said Dr. Ellis. "Both the Dept. of Health and the Schneider Regional Medical Center have among the top testing abilities available in the United States," Dr. Ellis said. The CLIA program, overseen by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), regulates laboratories that test human specimens and ensures they give accurate, reliable, and timely patient test results regardless of where the test is performed.

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