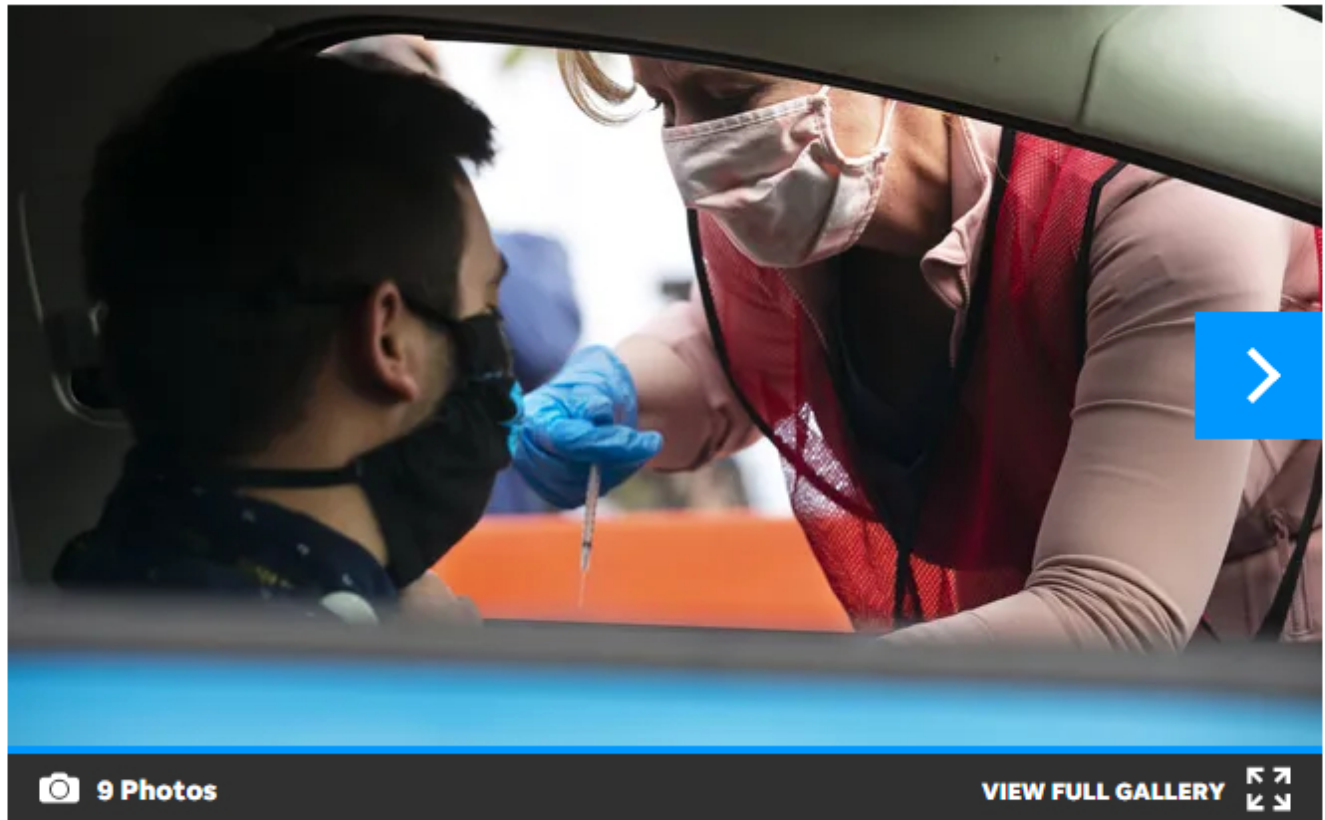


'Not a good time to have a lot of people over': Limit Super Bowl gatherings, Arizona health leaders say

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Phoenix Municipal Stadium opens as 2nd state-run COVID-19 vaccination site

Dr. Cara Christ, the Arizona Department of Health Services' director, helps administer COVID-19 vaccines at the second state-run site.

Super Bowl Sunday may seem like a great party opportunity, but Arizona health leaders advise nixing big gatherings to avoid another COVID-19 spike.

"I know the numbers are looking better in Arizona, that's great — let's not make the mistake of falsely falling into a stupor about not having to worry about maintaining our mitigation factors," said Dr. Joshua LaBaer, executive director of the Arizona State University Biodesign Institute.

"The Super Bowl is coming up. This is a good reminder to people that this is not a

good time to have a lot of people over and have Super Bowl parties," he said.

Hospitalizations for COVID-19 have begun to decline in Arizona, and some hospital leaders this week said they were optimistic that the second surge of the pandemic is on the wane following a spike after the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday seasons.

But they are reminding Arizonans to stay safe this Super Bowl Sunday by avoiding large gatherings, and if possible, by limiting parties to one's immediate household. Variant, more contagious strains of the new coronavirus are also of concern to health officials, which is another reason to maintain the COVID-19 prevention protocol.

"Let's not have the Super Bowl become a bunch of small superspreader events," said Dr. Michael White, chief medical officer for Valleywise Health in Phoenix. "We need to continue to wear our masks, continue to maintain our social distancing and not have gatherings outside our intimate families."

'Transmission can occur in those small groups'

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently issued Super Bowl [guidance](#) encouraging people to watch at home with individuals they live with. The CDC recommends virtual watch parties or outdoor viewing parties if people choose to gather, ideally with a projector to broadcast the game so people can stay 6 feet apart.

If people gather, they should avoid "shouting, cheering loudly, or singing. Clap, stomp your feet, or bring (or provide) hand-held noisemakers instead," the CDC recommends.

State health officials advise anyone gathering with people outside their immediate household to wear a mask and stay 6 feet apart.

"We know that when people are in comfortable familiar settings they let their guard down, especially when they're around people they love and trust," Arizona Department of Health Services Director Dr. Cara Christ said at a vaccination event this week.

"Our recommendation is still the same as it was over the holidays: If you are around people that do not live in your house, make sure that you have a mask on, you stay 6 feet away and that you try to limit the number of people at the

gatherings. I will likely be watching the halftime show at my home with my immediate family," Christ said.

Variant strains of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 have emerged, including three confirmed Arizona cases of the U.K. variant, which have been found to spread more easily and quickly between people.

The U.K. variant strain is also known as B.1.1.7. As of Thursday, 611 positive cases had been reported in 33 states, according to the CDC.

Variants first identified in South Africa and Brazil are also of concern. Neither has yet been identified in Arizona, but both have popped up in several cases elsewhere in the U.S. The vaccine may be slightly less effective against the South African variant.

White said the Valleywise Health Medical Center in central Phoenix is keeping all the physical changes it made to the hospital to accommodate COVID-19 patients, including engineering negative pressure rooms. He'd prefer not to see another surge but wants to be prepared just in case.

"Certainly what we have seen, and the holidays are a perfect example from this, is when people start to gather, that's when we start to see that transmission can occur in those small groups," White said.

"Even though people may be feeling well, they may be asymptomatic, we know that that virus can still spread. So bringing people together, you may spread it to somebody, even though you are feeling well, and then that person spreads it even further and we start to see our case numbers again rise, much as we did after Thanksgiving, after Christmas, after New Year's."

Arizona ICU units remain 'very busy' with COVID-19 patients

Arizona has not yet vaccinated anywhere near enough people to have an impact on the spread of the virus, LaBaer said.

"We estimate that maybe 22% to 27% of Arizonans have been infected by now," he said. "That means that there's still three-quarters of the folks out there who have not been infected, and it's better if we can keep them from getting infected, so we still need to wear masks and keep our circles small, do things carefully."

Hospitals are seeing fewer COVID-19 patients, but they are still "very busy," particularly in intensive care units, said Dr. Marjorie Bessel, chief clinical officer for Phoenix-based Banner Health, which is caring for roughly half of the state's hospitalized COVID-19 patients.

ICU occupancy at Banner Health is still 10% higher than it was during the peak of

the summer surge, Bessel said during a briefing, and ventilator usage also continues to be higher than the summer peak.

"We hope that everybody can take appropriate precautions so that we do not have another spike post this upcoming Super Bowl Sunday like we did after Christmas, for instance," she said. "So please, shrink your circles and wear your mask appropriately."

LaBaer noted that the National Football League is taking the pandemic seriously, has strict COVID-19 protocols and, along with the CDC, recently published data on how it had managed the pandemic.

The NFL found that transmission of the virus occurred in less than 15 minutes of cumulative interaction between individuals, the time frame initially used in the CDC's definition of "close contact," the research shows.

Evidence generated by the NFL data led to a revised definition of high-risk contacts that led contact tracers and medical experts to consider information beyond duration and distance, such as masking and ventilation, NFL officials said.

"Keep in mind that if even one player on a team gets infected, that's money to these teams. That's a big deal because if they can't play that player, that can affect the outcome for the team," LaBaer said.

"All of their cafeterias ... were shut down for indoor eating. People had to take the food and go. They basically came to very strict procedures to reduce transmission from individual to individual, largely because any infection in team members was

of serious consequence to them.”