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JOINT PRESS RELEASE

Athens' Health Care Systems Address Public on COVID-19

Athens – Piedmont Athens Regional Medical Center and St. Mary's Health Care System have come together to address the public regarding the latest COVID-19 impacts and the result of the rapid spread of the Delta and Omicron variants.

Both Athens hospitals are once again experiencing a staggering surge in adults and children with COVID-19 symptoms and diagnoses. Collectively, the health care systems have experienced 100 to 200 percent increases in COVID-19 hospitalizations in the past eight days and the vast majority of inpatients are unvaccinated. This comes at a time when the health systems are preparing for an influx of patients with seasonal flu.

Emergency room activity has also increased significantly for both emergent and non-emergent situations, including those seeking COVID-19 testing without the need for further care or treatment. To keep emergency rooms available to individuals who have the most critical health needs, individuals should obtain care at the most appropriate medical facility for their condition and seek COVID-19 testing at primary care locations, public health and mass testing sites or use at-home testing kits.

While the hospitals in Athens and throughout Georgia have best practices in place to actively manage capacity and provide high-quality patient care, we need the public's help and support. Doing the following will help us all navigate this significant wave, minimize serious illness and hospitalizations from COVID, and better manage Emergency Room diversions and wait times at our facilities:

- Get fully vaccinated for COVID-19, obtain the COVID-19 booster when eligible and get the seasonal flu vaccine.
- Go to the most appropriate medical facility for your condition when you require care – and do not delay care if you need immediate medical attention.
 - Please remember that Emergency Rooms are for those seeking examination and treatment for medical emergencies, not for routine COVID-19 testing or mild symptoms.
- If you have mild symptoms, call your medical provider for guidance. In case of serious or potentially life-threatening symptoms, call 911.
- Use at-home testing kits, public health testing locations or independent testing facilities if you need to be tested for COVID-19 unless you are ill and need medical care.
 - For routine COVID-19 tests, you can find a location near you on the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) website at: dph.georgia.gov/covidtesting.
- Consult your provider for appropriate treatment options if you are diagnosed with COVID-19.
- Continue to actively follow [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov) and [DPH](https://dph.georgia.gov) guidelines, and practice the “3 Ws” safety measures - wear a mask, wash your hands, and watch your distance.

- Anticipate increased wait times for medical services. Due to the influx of patients and increased demands placed on our health care workforce, we ask everyone who enters our facilities to practice patience and kindness with each other and with our care team members who are providing expert, compassionate care.

We want to thank the Georgia Department of Public Health and the Northeast Health District for their continued outreach to the public and especially for their rapid response to the sudden increase in demand for access to testing. We continue to work with DPH and the Health District to address our region's health needs during this fast-progressing surge, and with the Governor's Office to address staffing challenges at hospitals across the state due to COVID-19.

Piedmont Athens and St. Mary's will continue to work together to inform the public about the local impacts of COVID-19 and address the most critical health needs facing our area. We thank the community for their support of our employees, providers and hospitals as we work to prevent illness and save lives. Now and always, the health and safety of our patients and our communities is our top priority.

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