

Boston Herald

Infectious disease expert: Boston COVID-19 positive rate is a ‘wildfire’ close to becoming an ‘inferno’

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Boston’s COVID-19 positive test rate is a “wildfire” that is close to becoming an “inferno” if officials fail to take more precautions, according to one expert.

The city’s positive test rate has doubled in a month and a half to 7.8%, and shows no sign of dropping.

And Boston is not alone. Last week, 121 of the state’s cities and towns — more than a third of the 351 total Massachusetts municipalities — are in the high-risk “red zone.”

“7.8 % is a wildfire. We’re getting close to an inferno,” said Dr. Todd Ellerin, director of infectious diseases at South Shore Health. “The time is now to take our foot completely off the accelerator and onto the brakes; otherwise the governor, his leadership team and the state Department of Public Health will be forced to put their foot on the emergency brake. It may already be too late to avoid that.”

Boston Health Chief Marty Martinez told reporters on Friday that the city is considering stopping indoor dining or rolling back other restrictions as coronavirus cases continue to mount.

The city shut down both indoor and outdoor dining, as well as a range of other businesses, at the start of the pandemic before gradually allowing them to reopen over the summer.

But stopping indoor dining will not be enough to reverse the infection rate, Ellerin said. Because 80% of the coronavirus clusters have been in people’s homes, he said, they should wear masks at home, as well as elsewhere, and everyone who can work from home should.

Because people need ventilation, they also should open windows about 6 inches when they’re in a room, Ellerin said, and they should think twice about having people with whom they don’t live over for Thanksgiving.

Dr. Amesh Adalja, senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said shutdowns or stay-at-home orders are not the solution.

“What you have to do is look at what’s driving the increase; is it restaurants, is it bars, is it sports activities?” Adalja said. “You can fix it. ... It always boils down to testing, tracing and isolating.”

Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a Phoenix-based general surgeon and senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, agreed that lockdowns are not the answer, nor, he added is “micromanaging.”

“It’s a fool’s errand to think that if you lock down long enough, the virus is going to disappear,” Singer said. “We should give people who run businesses the freedom to come up with their own solutions, based on CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) guidelines. One size does not fit all. The more flexibility you have, the more compliance you’re going to get.”

But Ellerin said it’s unclear if individual behaviors will be enough to reverse the positivity rate.

“This virus can be unforgiving and relentless,” he said. “We have to act aggressively now because before we blink, the positive test rate could be 10 to 15%. Everything should be on the table because we are going in the wrong direction. ... We have to starve this virus of fuel.”