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I had hoped not to write about COVID again! But things have changed rapidly, prompting me to update you. The new delta variant is spreading fast because it is much more infectious. Hideaway cases have risen after several weeks of zero. My physician friends at Tyler hospitals are telling me that they are again inundated with new COVID patients and COVID wards are being reopened. If hospitals become overwhelmed, we would again have difficulty getting care for serious non-COVID problems. My close family member's heart surgery in Pensacola has been postponed indefinitely due to their hospital overflowing with COVID patients. He is fully vaccinated and therefore at low risk for COVID complications but is elderly and at high risk of death from heart problems. Now he has to wait, hoping that he doesn't die because of his heart. We don't want something similar to happen here.

The big difference today is that COVID vaccines have been proven safe and highly effective.

I was certainly very concerned about these new vaccines when they were first introduced so quickly, but after nearly 2.5 BILLION people worldwide receiving a variety of these vaccines over the past 8 months, I am convinced that they are safe, effective and the best way to get us out of this situation.

As long as the virus continues to spread, we will have more variants – some more infectious or more lethal, others milder than the original, just like the flu every year. We will continue to have controversial mandates. If we want to stop this and get to a place similar to the flu, we need to reduce new variants by reducing spread. To achieve this, avoiding crowds, improving ventilation, washing hands, social distancing and masking are all helpful, but I must impress upon you that vaccines have proven far more effective.

For anyone who is thinking that the vaccines don't work, all you need to know is this: about 90% of people in hospitals due to COVID are UN-vaccinated. Just think about that for a minute. It should be all the proof we need.

Yes, some vaccinated people can still get COVID, but they overwhelmingly fare much better. Those who are hesitating because the vaccine has "only" emergency approval should realize that these vaccines have now been "tested" in the real world far more than the typical controlled study. It is true that issues of concern exist, like myocarditis in young males and that is certainly something to discuss with your doctor along with any other concerns. But by and large, the general population has done amazingly well with these safe and effective vaccines.

The delta variant is causing a lot more hospitalizations among the higher-risk young, many of whom mistakenly think they are low risk. I hear comments like "I don't have high blood pressure, it is normal with medication" or "I'm only carrying a few extra pounds". However, if you have obesity (BMI of 30+) or are taking medications for high blood pressure, diabetes or

other chronic diseases, then you are at high risk, regardless of your age. You need to be vaccinated

to protect yourself from serious COVID.

Finally, consider this: 96% of doctors are vaccinated! That should tell you how much WE believe in the safety and efficacy of these vaccines. If you trust us to treat you when you are sick, then please trust us to prevent you from getting sick. Nothing in life is 100% risk free, so no one can promise you that the vaccines, or eating, drinking, breathing and driving are risk free. All we can promise you is that the risk of vaccination is now known to be tiny compared to the risk of COVID complications.

Please protect yourself and your loved ones. Please get vaccinated. Best of health to us all.