Delta variant as contagious as chicken pox: CDC document

'Breakthrough infections in vaccinated people highly contagious'

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The Delta variant of the coronavirus is as contagious as chickenpox, probably causes more severe disease than past strains, and breakthrough cases in vaccinated individuals may be as transmissible as unvaccinated cases, according to a leaked U.S. government document.

The slide presentation produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stresses that "the war has changed" as a result of Delta. It was first reported by *The Washington Post*.

CDC director Rochelle Walenksy cited data from the presentation this week to justify a return to masks for vaccinated people in high-risk areas.

Rochelle Walenksy

One of the biggest takeaways is the finding that breakthrough infections in vaccinated people are highly contagious, with the data coming from previous studies and a new analysis of an outbreak in Provincetown.

Experts rely on a number called the cycle threshold (Ct) value to indicate how much virus an infected person harbours, with lower numbers indicating higher viral load. In Provincetown, there was "no difference in mean Ct values in vaccinated and unvaccinated cases," the slides said.

A review of findings from other countries shows that each person with Delta infects on average eight others, making it as transmissible as chickenpox but still less than measles.

Vaccine efficacy estimates vary across countries, but in its concluding slide, the CDC estimates the risk of severe disease or death is reduced 10-fold or greater in the vaccinated, while risk of infection is reduced three-fold or greater.