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As tourists flock to Orlando this summer, experts fear COVID surge

By Caroline Catherman

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Travelers at Orlando International Airport, on Monday, May 23, 2022. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/ Orlando Sentinel) (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)

As [tourism skyrockets in Orange County](#), there's another trend that isn't something to celebrate: COVID-19 cases have been [creeping up for months in Central Florida](#), health experts say.

Visit Orlando officials have [previously told](#) the Orlando Sentinel they expect this summer's tourism numbers to nearly reach pre-pandemic levels. Epidemiologists such as Aileen Marty, professor of infectious diseases at Florida International University, have said they also expect COVID-19 cases to [increase over the summer](#).

"It looks very, very bad right now in terms of escaping having a summer surge," Marty said over email. "How bad that summer surge is, that is very hard to predict, because there's so many variables that can increase or decrease that."

The Florida Department of Health does not publicly share data about positive COVID-19 cases in non-residents in its biweekly reports, so the number of COVID-19-positive tourists may never be known. However, data about COVID-19 in Orlando tourists' cities of origin suggests that most visitors come from places where the virus is circulating widely.

Visit Orlando tracks where visitors come from using data from geo-location intelligence data company Arrivalist. Denise Spiegel, a spokesperson, shared the top 10 destinations of origin from May 1, 2021, to May 3, 2022.

The data reveals most of Orlando's visitors come from other parts of Florida. It's most common to see tourists from the Tampa and Saint Petersburg area, followed by the Miami metro area; then from the areas surrounding Orlando such as Daytona Beach or Melbourne.

New York City comes in fourth, followed by West Palm Beach, Jacksonville, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Fort Myers, and finally Chicago.

The in-state travel all comes from areas experiencing [high community levels of](#)

[COVID-19](#); this means hospitalization rates are high enough that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urges everyone to wear masks to reduce the odds of resources being threatened.

Most Central Florida counties receive that designation as well.

Northeastern cities such as New York or Philadelphia, meanwhile, are seeing a downtick in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations after a rise, though transmission is still high, [according to the CDC](#).

Dr. Mark Chaet, dean of Florida State University College of Medicine's Orlando Regional Campus, said there's "no question" travel contributes to COVID-19 spread, but the state's relatively high vaccination rates may blunt negative impacts.

"We'll see cases come into our state, but they won't have the ability to spread as rapidly if they were coming in to say, Alabama," Chaet said.

In-state travel may not be a big concern if people take steps to reduce their risk of COVID-19, he added, like traveling by car and masking.

Though international travel to Orlando is less common, it concerns Chaet and Marty more than in-state or national travel.

Central Florida mayors and the tourism industry [anticipate international travel to the region will pick up in the coming months](#) in light of the news that inbound international travelers who are vaccinated no longer have to produce a negative test within a day of boarding their flights.

International travelers may be more likely to transmit COVID-19 if their country does not have easy access to high-quality vaccines, Marty said. She added that international travel increases the risk that a visitor may bring a variant of COVID-19 that recombines with a variant in their destination, creating a new strain that may be even more infectious or severe.

“Anytime that one host hosts more than one type, viruses will mix and match,” Marty said. “Some of that mix and matching is advantageous to the virus and can form a new worse strain.”

Chaet said it’s important for at-risk people to stay aware and exercise caution, especially when visiting popular tourist destinations.

“Know what your own situation and vulnerability looks like, and continue trying to social distance, wash your hands, just like you would during flu season,” he said.

ccatherman@orlandosentinel.com; @CECatherman on Twitter