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CORONAVIRUS

COVID hospitalizations rise 33% in Central Florida amid new variant, foreign spread

By Caroline Catherman

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Covid testing site in Parking Garage A at the University of Central Florida, on Tuesday, May 17, 2022. There has been a slow increase in COVID-19 cases over the last month, but it's not a big enough increase to say this is a surge. Hospitalizations slightly increased but are low. The flu, however, is abnormally high. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel) (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)

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As COVID-19 activity picks up internationally and a new subtype of the omicron variant makes its way across the U.S., COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in Florida are climbing.

There have been a number of troubling developments in the virus' evolution recently, including the new omicron subvariant, XBB.1.5.

The new subvariant seems to bypass previous immunity and resist COVID-19 treatments such as monoclonal antibodies. The virus that causes COVID-19 attacks people's cells by sticking to them, and this new strain is also "stickier," said Dr. Daniel Van Durme, senior associate dean for Clinical and Community Affairs and professor at Florida State University College of Medicine.

It does not appear to be more severe, but there's not enough research to know for sure, Durme said.

"We're not sure yet how much sicker it's going to make people because it is happening in a world where most people have some degree of immunity, either from a natural infection or a vaccine," Durme said.

The new bivalent booster shot from Pfizer and Moderna is expected to offer some protection against the new variant, though old shots likely won't.

"Get the newest booster, it can keep you out of the hospital and can literally save your life," Durme said.

Meanwhile, cases are increasing in Central Florida.

The Altamonte Springs and Casselberry sewer service areas are developing a test to determine how prevalent XBB.1.5 is in Central Florida. There's evidence COVID-19 is on the rise locally, said Altamonte Springs City Manager Frank Martz.

"We measured a very large increase in SARS-CoV-2 RNA genomes in this past Thursday's sample — the highest concentration we have measured since ... the Omicron surge last January," Martz said in an email.

Corresponding with the increase in wastewater, there were 80,749 new COVID-19 cases recorded over the last three weeks among Florida residents, bringing the cumulative total to 7,350,177, according to the Florida Department of Health's latest report.

This data means there was an average of about 27,000 cases added per week in three weeks, compared to an average of about 21,000 per week in the two weeks prior. The wide availability of at-home testing guarantees this is an underestimate.

These cases are accompanied by a rise in hospitalizations of COVID-19-positive individuals at local hospitals.

Across the state, 3,355 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 from Dec. 28 to Jan. 3, a 40% jump in COVID-19 admissions from the week prior, [according to the latest White House report](#). In comparison, 1,847 were hospitalized per week three weeks ago. Five weeks ago, it was 1,451.

The Orlando metro area saw a 33% jump to 178 confirmed COVID-19 admissions. As of the week of Jan. 3, 83% of inpatient beds are occupied, 5% by a COVID-19 patient, according to the White House report. Intensive care unit capacity is still sufficient at 79%.

The report flags hospitals where capacity tops 81%, marking capacity as critical once a hospital reaches 91% or more.

The hospitals are not overwhelmed at this time.

“We’ve seen an increase in our COVID numbers here at Osceola Regional, as all hospitals have across Florida and really, in most of the nation. It’s not been a dramatic increase,” said Dr. Ross Taylor, chief medical officer of HCA Florida Osceola Hospital. “We are nowhere near capacity.”

Some of these patients are in the hospital for reasons other than COVID-19 and tested positive incidentally, unlike in the past, Taylor added.

Nonetheless, some patients have landed in hospital beds due to COVID-19 complications, he said.

With 570 more fatalities on record, 84,176 Florida residents have died, according to the Florida Department of Health’s most recent report.

“COVID is a big deal,” Taylor said. “The experience with that variant is so new that the message really is: to avoid severe illness, to avoid transmitting the virus to our loved ones, the vaccination and the bivalent booster is the best way to go.”

For those not worried about hospitalization or death, long COVID-19 — lasting effects from the virus — can happen to anyone, even if they didn't experience it after past bouts with the virus, said Jill Roberts, an associate professor at the University of South Florida College of Public Health.

“I've heard people saying ‘oh, I've had COVID four or five times and it was mild every time,” Roberts said. “Eventually, your luck's gonna run out.”

Vaccines and COVID-19 tests are still available across the nation, including [four free, mail-order test kits](#) per household at covid.gov/tests. Testing options can be located at [Floridahealthcovid19.gov/testing-sites](https://floridahealthcovid19.gov/testing-sites).

Statewide, 16,100,702 residents, or 73% of people age 6 months and up, have received at least one vaccination shot.

Booster uptake is much lower. The majority, 7,766,101, have completed their shot regimens but have not received an additional dose. About 13,000 received an additional dose this week, bringing the total to 6,128,968.

Meanwhile, another concern is brewing internationally.

Since Dec. 7, when China abruptly abandoned its “zero COVID” policy and ended restrictions, cases climbed, though, according to the Chinese government and some mathematical projections, [cases may have peaked](#) and are heading down.

The U.S. has begun requiring proof of a negative COVID-19 test for Chinese travelers to enter the country, which should protect us here, Roberts said.

We may also be protected because the strains spiking in China have already infected many U.S. citizens and are covered by the current Moderna and Pfizer vaccines.

But there's also a reason to stay alert: this rapid COVID-19 spread increases the odds of a new mutation, a mistake made when the virus attempts to spread by

replicating itself. Most mutations are harmless, but some have features that allow them to take off and become the dominant form of COVID-19, Roberts said.

“With that huge number of cases, with the spread going basically unchecked, it’s completely possible,” she said.

Central Florida added 14,386 resident infections over the last three weeks, based on the actual date the state opened the case, for a total of 1,440,233: 4,187 more in Orange for 464,582; 799 more in Osceola for 139,286; 1,414 more in Polk for 250,532; 623 more in Lake for 105,037; 262 more in Sumter for 28,716; 720 more in Volusia for 145,206; 769 more in Brevard for 168,824; and 578 more in Seminole for 127,851.

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