CORONAVIRUS

After biggest one-day coronavirus total, how bad could it get in Florida?

By DAVID FLESHLER
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Governor Ron DeSantis is not considering rolling back coronavirus protections and shutting Florida down again.
A record single-day increase in coronavirus cases in Florida may indicate a resurgence of the disease after stir-crazy residents returned to restaurants, malls and beaches, experts say.

Statistics about COVID-19 have been all over the map, with projections, revised projections, declines, plateaus and one-day spikes that have often provided little indication of the disease’s true course. But experts say there are reasons to take seriously Tuesday’s one-day increase of 2,783 cases.
The record number came not as a spike on an otherwise flat trend line but followed two weeks of rising numbers. It comes as a growing percentage of people taking the test come up positive for the disease. And it’s accompanied by a rise in emergency room visits for flu-like symptoms since early May, a closely watched statistic thought to represent the leading edge of the disease.

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“I think taken together, this indicates there’s evidence of an increase in community-wide transmission,” said Mary Jo Trepka, chairwoman of the Department of Epidemiology at Florida International University. “It’s always a problem looking day-to-day because we do get these spikes. But for Miami-Dade we’ve seen for the last two weeks a steady increase, and the proportion of tests that are positive has also increased over the last two weeks. Certainly if it gets worse we’ll worry about hospitals not having the capacity that they need to take care of people.”

The jump in new cases follows weeks of increased commerce, restaurant dining and mingling that appears to indicate many people think the worst has passed. And while it may be too soon for them to show up in the statistics, experts expect to see additional cases from the **police brutality protests** of the past two weeks.

"While we were locked down, the numbers were low," said José Szapocznik, chairman of the Department of Public Health Sciences at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. "And as people became more mobile and got out of their homes, the numbers began to increase. So we are by far not out of the woods. Things are going to get much worse before they get better.”
Gov. Ron DeSantis, whose aggressive reopening strategy has attracted national praise and criticism, said the rise in cases did not necessarily reflect an increase in new cases. Instead, he said, it results from the number of younger people getting tested so they could return to work and a testing strategy that focuses on hard-hit communities, such as farmworkers.

He **vowed the state would not pull back** on its reopening process.

“We’re not shutting down, we’re going to go forward,” he said, speaking at a news conference on Tuesday in Tallahassee. “We’re not rolling back.”

But concerned by the rising numbers, South Florida government leaders have been discussing what steps to take to address them. The Palm Beach County Commission, for example, plans Tuesday to discuss **making masks mandatory** in stores and other places open to the public, a step already taken in Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

Dr. Leslie Beitsch, chairman of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine at Florida State University’s College of Medicine, said the rise in new cases
Still, he said, the virus and the measures to control it have devastated the economy, and that’s something that needs to be considered in reopening decisions.

“We can’t remained closed forever,” Beitsch said. “The economic and health harms actually travel together. If you can’t pay rent or buy food, that’s a danger to families. But these are the kind of numbers that make you ask did we get the balance right?”

How bad could it get?

A widely used model from the University of Washington predicts little increase in the daily infection rate until July, with a sharper increase in August, reaching 30,000 per day by early September. The daily death rate is also projected to rise, increasing sharply in September to reach more than 400 by late September. That compares to a daily death count of 55 reported Tuesday.
“The University of Washington is now projecting by the end of October 200,000 deaths if we continue on this trend,” Beitsch said, referring to the national death toll. “And again a disproportionate number of those have the potential to be in our own state because of our demographics.”

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The news is not all bad. The positivity rate is well down from its April peak. The daily death toll has been declining from their late April peak of 83. And hospitals have not been overwhelmed, as many feared they would be. Although hospitals admissions are up, hospitals are not experiencing anything like the pessimistic scenarios that envisioned them running out of beds.

The current statewide hospital occupancy rate is about 75%. The Florida Agency for Healthcare Administration reported the state average as 67% for 2018, the most recent year available. As new cases continue to rise, however, the hospital situation could change.

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Jackson Health System, the Miami-based nonprofit system, experienced a “significant increase in the number of COVID-19 inpatients over the last week,” spokeswoman Tania Leets said. But she said the system continues to have sufficient beds and equipment to handle the additional cases.

Wael Barsoum, chief executive officer of Cleveland Clinic Florida, said the increase in cases has not resulted in significantly more hospitalizations. But he said that could change as the number of cases continues to climb.

“The increase in positive cases may be an early harbinger of what may start happening in one or two weeks as we see positive patients requiring hospitalization,” he said.

Although the number of cases is up statewide, he said the more significant numbers for the healthcare system are deaths and hospitalizations.

“The real number of hospitalizations and deaths due to coronavirus has been relatively stable,” he said. "That makes me confident the healthcare system will not get overwhelmed.”

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Marc Freeman and Cindy Krischer Goodman contributed to this report.

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