Has flu season, in full swing, reached its height?

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Flu is now widespread in every state except Hawaii, but the good news is the season appears to already be peaking.

It's been a rough few weeks: Hospitals have set up tents to handle patient overflow. Doctors are putting in double and triple shifts. Ambulances have been sidelined while paramedics waited to drop off patients.

"This morning, I couldn't stand up. I was really weak," said Margaret Shafer, who went to a Seattle emergency room this week after a bout with the flu was followed by pneumonia.

But an update out Friday from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows patient traffic for flu is no longer skyrocketing the way it was in December.

"It looks like it's starting to level out," said the CDC's Lynnette Brammer, who oversees flu tracking.

Still, flu is unpredictable. "I don't know where it will end up," she added.

Many flu seasons don't really get going until around Christmas, and don't crescendo until February. That's how last year's flu season played out. This season got off to an early start and cases surged over the holidays.

Patients who went to the ER at Palomar Medical Center Escondido, north of San Diego, then had to wait as long as nine hours. The hospital this week took down a tent it used to handle the overflow but is still seeing a lot of patients with fevers, aches, chills and other flu symptoms.

"We're having to treat people in hallways, in chairs, wherever we have space," said Michelle Gunnett, the director of emergency services.

There's a tent in place at Kaweah Delta Medical Center in the Central California city of Visalia, where doctors this week have been pulling double and triple shifts to keep up.

"It's like a MASH unit," said Dr. Ed Hirsch, the hospital's chief medical officer.

In Chicago, paramedics have been forced to wait at ERs with patients for as long as two hours for an open spot. That means the ambulances can't be used for other calls, said Larry Langford, a spokesman for the city's fire department.

What had some people worried about this U.S. flu season was the bad season last year in Australia. That country was hit hard by a flu bug that's notorious for causing severe illness, and flu viruses spread around the world. Preliminary estimates suggested the vaccine barely worked there, and the U.S. was again facing the same H3N2 virus with the same flu shot.

That virus caused one of the worst U.S. flu seasons in recent years, 2014-15, when the vaccine was a poor match. It was back last winter but the vaccine was a better fit.

Health officials say this year's shot targets the strains that are making Americans sick, primarily H3N2. How well it is working won't be known until next month but it's expected to be better than the 10 percent Australia reported.

The report out Friday shows flu and pneumonia deaths crept up last week to push flu to an epidemic level. Flu reaches that threshold most winters, even during seasons that are not considered particularly bad.

Hospitalizations of the elderly are climbing. So far they're not shooting up quite like they did in 2014-2015, but health officials are watching the numbers closely.

The CDC estimates there are tens of thousands of deaths each year from

flu and pneumonia.

One suburban San Diego case shows how serious the flu can be. Jennifer Burrough and her family didn't get flu shots this year after hearing reports that suggested it might not work very well this season.

Her 12-year-old son came home with the bug around the holidays, then her two youngest kids got sick and she did, too. They all recovered quickly. But her 48-year-old Navy veteran husband, Shawn Burrough, landed in the hospital. There, he had trouble breathing and his kidneys started shutting down. He was medically sedated and put on a breathing machine.

"We didn't figure it would be like this," said Jennifer Burrough. "You don't expect to wake up with sniffles and two days later find yourself in a medically induced coma. It was rapid, just rapid."

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