

U.S. coronavirus cases near 3 million as hospitals in Sun Belt fill up with patients

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(HealthDay)—With the number of coronavirus cases in the United

States approaching 3 million on Monday, hospitals across the Sun Belt continued to be flooded with COVID-19 patients.

Arizona reached 89 percent capacity for ICU beds, as Alabama, California, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas also reported unprecedented numbers of hospitalizations, the *Washington Post* reported.

For the 28th day in a row, the country's rolling seven-day average of daily new cases obliterated previous records, though the number of deaths nationwide has remained relatively stable, the newspaper reported.

Testing centers across the country are now being stretched to their limits, according to the *Post*. In many cities, a combination of factors are fueling the problem: a shortage of key supplies, backlogs at laboratories that perform the tests, and surging infection counts as cases climb in almost 40 states.

Forget any talk about a second wave of COVID-19 infections, because America is "still knee deep in the first wave," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said Monday, the *Post* reported. Unlike Europe, "we never came down to baseline and now are surging back up," he explained.

Other [public health experts](#) have issued similar warnings.

"We're right back where we were at the peak of the epidemic during the New York outbreak," former U.S. Food and Drug Administration commissioner Scott Gottlieb said Sunday on the *CBS* show, "Face the Nation," the *Post* reported. "The difference now is that we really had one epicenter of spread when New York was going through its hardship, now we really have four major epicenters of spread: Los Angeles, cities in

Texas, cities in Florida, and Arizona. And Florida looks to be in the worst shape."

On Monday, new coronavirus cases in that state exceeded 6,300, *NBC Miami* reported. That is a drop from the 10,000 new cases a day the state has experienced multiple times in recent weeks, the *Post* reported.

Florida's total caseload passed 206,400, a grim milestone only reached so far by three other states—New York, California and Texas—the *New York Times* reported.

Meanwhile, the virus appears to be spreading wildly in Arizona, as hospitals rushed to expand capacity and adopted practices similar to those employed at the height of the outbreak in New York City and Italy, the *Post* reported. Those measures include doubling up hospital beds in rooms, pausing elective surgeries and bringing in health-care workers from other states.

So far, coronavirus death counts have not matched the spikes in new infections, however.

"What we're able to do is when people do get hospitalized and get into the ICU, we're able to save more lives with treatments like remdesivir, with steroids now, which has a big impact on mortality, and innovations in care like using blood thinners on patients and not intubating them as aggressively," Gottlieb explained.

As cases skyrocket, 'pooled' testing strategy tried

Case counts could get even worse.

The nation's top infectious disease expert warned that daily case counts could soon top 100,000 a day if the spread of COVID-19 isn't slowed.

"I can't make an accurate prediction, but it is going to be very disturbing, I will guarantee you that, because when you have an outbreak in one part of the country, even though in other parts of the country they are doing well, they are vulnerable," Dr. Anthony Fauci said during a Senate committee hearing last week.

"We've really got to do something about that, and we need to do it quickly," Fauci testified during questioning from Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.).

One new strategy that U.S. health officials plan to adopt is "pooled" coronavirus testing, the *Times* reported. The decades-old method would vastly increase the number of virus tests performed in the United States.

Instead of carefully rationing tests to only those with symptoms, pooled testing would allow frequent surveillance of asymptomatic people, the newspaper reported. Mass identification of coronavirus infections could hasten the reopening of schools, offices and factories.

With pooled testing, nasal or saliva swabs are taken from large groups of people. Setting aside part of each individual's sample, a lab then combines the rest into a batch holding five to 10 samples each. If a pooled sample yields a positive result, the lab would retest the reserved parts of each individual sample that went into the pool, pinpointing the infected person, according to the *Times*.

"We're in intensive discussions about how we're going to do it," Fauci told the *Times*. "We hope to get this off the ground as soon as possible."

A handful of states have actually brought the virus under control after being slammed in the early stages of the pandemic. Determined to keep case counts low, New York, Connecticut and New Jersey have said they will now mandate quarantines for travelers coming from states that are

experiencing large spikes in new cases, the *Times* said.

By Tuesday, the U.S. coronavirus case count neared 3 million as the death toll passed 130,000, according to a *Times* tally.

According to the same tally, the top five states in coronavirus cases as of Tuesday were: New York with over 402,000; California with over 277,800; Texas with more than 209, 000; Florida with over 206,000; and New Jersey with more than 175,400.

Vaccines and treatments

There has been some good news in recent weeks, however. Researchers at Oxford University in England announced that dexamethasone, a widely used, low-cost steroid, appears to cut the death rate for ventilated COVID-19 patients by one-third. It also lowered the death rate for patients who require oxygen (but are not yet on a ventilator) by one-fifth, the *Times* reported.

"Bottom line is, good news," Fauci, who directs the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told the *Associated Press*. "This is a significant improvement in the available therapeutic options that we have."

But at least three manufacturers of the drug have reported shortages, according to the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, *STAT* News reported. Two of the manufacturers cited increased demand as a reason for their shortages.

Meanwhile, the search for an effective vaccine continues.

The [federal government](#) will pay Novavax \$1.6 billion to speed development of 100 million doses of a coronavirus vaccine by the

beginning of next year, the *Times* reported.

The deal is the largest that the Trump administration has made so far with a company as part of Operation Warp Speed, a federal effort to make coronavirus vaccines and treatments available to the American public as quickly as possible, the *Times* said.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) had already said that it would provide up to \$1.2 billion to the drug company AstraZeneca to develop a potential coronavirus vaccine from Oxford University, in England.

That research agreement funds a clinical trial of the potential vaccine in the United States this summer with about 30,000 volunteers, the *Times* reported.

The goal? To make at least 300 million doses that could be available as early as October, the HHS said in a statement.

The United States has already agreed to provide up to \$483 million to the biotech company Moderna and \$500 million to Johnson & Johnson for their vaccine efforts. It is also providing \$30 million to a virus vaccine effort led by the French company Sanofi, the *Times* reported. Moderna said a large clinical trial of its vaccine candidate could begin in July.

Nations grapple with pandemic

Elsewhere in the world, the situation remains challenging.

Even as the pandemic is easing in Europe and some parts of Asia, it is worsening in India. As officials in New Delhi worked to test all of the city's 29 million residents, the number of coronavirus cases passed

719,600 on Tuesday, making it the country with the third-highest number of COVID-19 cases and pushing many hospitals to their breaking point, the *Times* reported.

Brazil has also become a hotspot in the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, with well over 1.6 million confirmed infections by Tuesday, according to the Hopkins tally. It has the second-highest number of cases, behind only the United States.

Cases are also spiking wildly in Russia: As of Tuesday, that country reported the world's fourth-highest number of COVID-19 cases, at nearly 693,000, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 11.4 million on Tuesday, with nearly 538,000 deaths, according to the Hopkins tally.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the [new coronavirus](#).

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