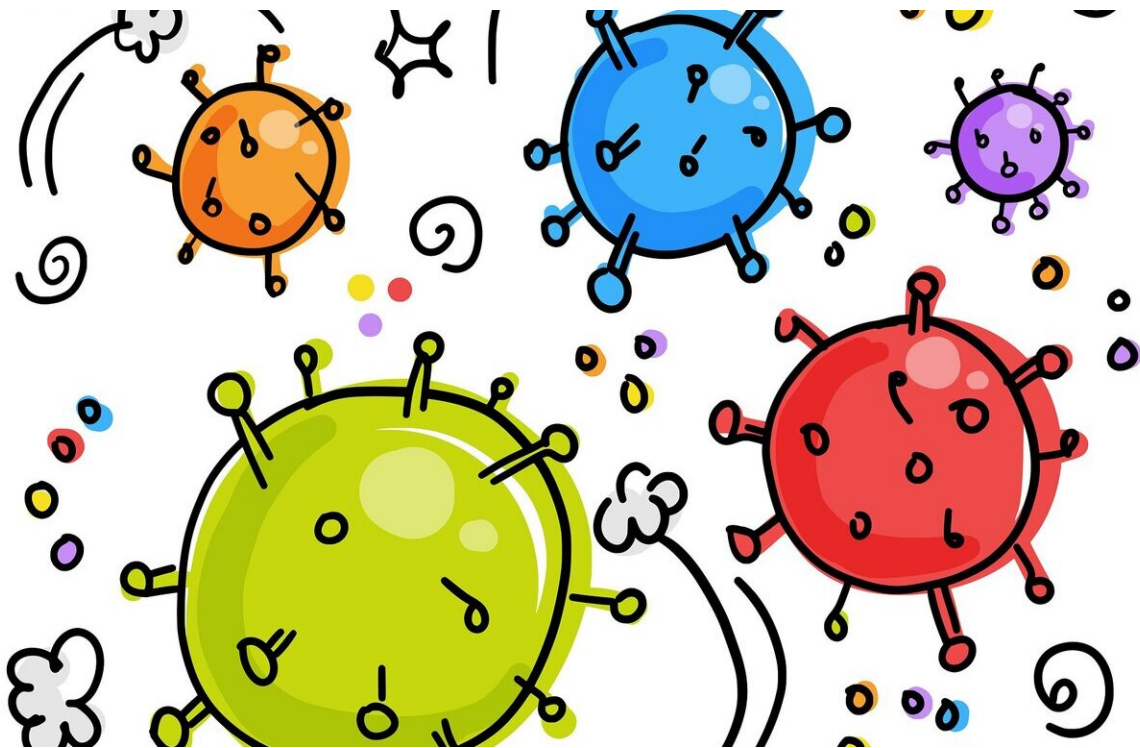


California virus hospitalizations could surge in next month

September 26 2020



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California has begun to see concerning upticks in coronavirus data after a sustained period of decline, the state's top health official said Friday, urging people to renew efforts to prevent spread.

The increases include the rate of cases per capita, hospital emergency

department visits for COVID-19 and new hospitalizations for confirmed or suspected cases, California Secretary of Health and Human Services Dr. Mark Ghaly said.

The trends appear to be attributable to gatherings and activities around the Labor Day holiday, Ghaly said. Other factors could include the recent reopening of businesses and massive wildfires that forced evacuations and millions to change their routines because of unhealthy air.

A troubling short-term forecast sees an 89% increase in COVID-19-related hospitalizations from the current 2,578—the lowest figure since early April—to just under 5,000 by Oct. 25, Ghaly said. An added concern is the upcoming flu season.

Ghaly noted that the state was heading into another hot weekend, which could lead to more people congregating with others and providing more opportunities for transmission of the virus.

"I think our key message today is continue to do what helped us get to a lower risk, safer, lower transmission environment across our state," he said.

Ghaly urged people to wear face coverings, maintain physical distancing, avoid mixing with others, get a flu shot and to "use good judgment."

"All of those tools that we have in our toolkit should be used this weekend and moving forward so we can really bring these upward trends back down, and even bring them further down," he said.

Ghaly also said California will conduct its own independent review of potential COVID-19 vaccines, signaling its distrust of the Trump administration's accelerated initiative. The state will assemble a

review board of leading scientists to assess the safety and effectiveness of any vaccine candidate, he said.

"We think it is an appropriate approach to take, especially because things are moving so quickly," he said. "We want to make sure—despite the urge and interest in having a useful vaccine—that we do it with the utmost safety of Californians in mind."

Earlier this week, more of California was cleared to reopen additional businesses, including most of the San Francisco Bay Area.

The lifting of some restrictions in counties that have shown improvement comes as California tries for a second time to recover from the devastating impact COVID-19 has had on business. An earlier effort to reopen more quickly backfired with a surge in cases and hospitalizations in late spring and early summer.

California has the most confirmed cases in the country with 801,000, and the fourth-most deaths with 15,461, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. The statewide infection rate for the last week was 2.8%, the lowest since the start of the pandemic, But it has started rising again in parts of the state.

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