

US virus deaths surpass 450K; daily toll is stubbornly high

February 4 2021, by Michelle R. Smith and Amy Taxin



In this Jan. 9, 2021, file photo, a hospital worker places a "COVID Patient" sticker on a body bag holding a deceased patient at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the Mission Hills section of Los Angeles. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling across the United States, but deaths have remained stubbornly high. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Coronavirus deaths in the United States surpassed 450,000 on Thursday, and daily deaths remain stubbornly high at more than 3,000 a day, despite falling infections and the arrival of multiple vaccines.

Infectious disease specialists expect deaths to start dropping soon, after new cases hit a peak right around the beginning of the year. New COVID-19 deaths could ebb as early as next week, said the new director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But there's also the risk that improving trends in infections and hospitalizations could be offset by people relaxing and coming together—including this Sunday, to watch football, she added.

"I'm worried about Super Bowl Sunday, quite honestly," Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Thursday in an interview with The Associated Press.

Walensky said one reason cases and hospitalizations are not rising as dramatically as they were weeks ago is because the effect of holiday gatherings has faded.

The effect on deaths is delayed. The daily toll amounts to 50,000 new fatalities in the last two weeks alone.

"We're still in quite a bad place," she said.

The nation reported 3,912 COVID-19 deaths Wednesday, down from the pandemic peak of 4,466 deaths on Jan. 12.

The biggest driver to the U.S. death toll over the past month has been California, which has averaged more than 500 deaths per day in recent weeks.



In this Jan. 7, 2021, file photo, people walk to a tent at a COVID-19 walk-up testing site on the Martin Luther King Jr. Medical Campus in Los Angeles. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling across the United States, but deaths have remained stubbornly high. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

Dora Padilla was among the thousands of Californians who died in the last month.

The 86-year-old daughter of Mexican immigrants served two decades as a schools trustee for Southern California's Alhambra Unified School District after helping out as a parent volunteer and band booster for her own children. She was one of few Latinos to hold elected office at the time.

She tested positive in December at the facility where she lived, then developed a fever and saw her oxygen level drop. The facility was going to call an ambulance but decided to treat her there amid a surge in infections that filled local hospitals with virus patients, said her daughter Lisa Jones.

"They were just about ready to call an ambulance, but they realized there is nowhere for her to go. She is going to end up in a hallway somewhere," Jones said.

Padilla was stable for days and seemed to be improving, but suddenly grew ill again before she died.



In this Jan. 8, 2021, file photo, emergency medical technician Thomas Hoang, 29, of Emergency Ambulance Service, pushes a gurney into an emergency room

to drop off a COVID-19 patient in Placentia, Calif. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling across the United States, but deaths have remained stubbornly high. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

"I am still just kind of numb," her daughter said.

California's experience has mirrored many of the inequalities that have been exposed since the pandemic began nearly a year ago, with people of color being hit especially hard.

For example, Latinos make up 46% of California's overall death toll, despite being 39% of the state's population. The situation has worsened in recent months. In November, the daily number of Latino deaths was 3.5 per 100,000 residents, but that rate shot up to 40 deaths per 100,000 last week.

Alabama is another hot spot. The seven-day rolling average of deaths there has risen over the past two weeks, from 74 to 147 deaths per day. Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Tennessee also saw surges in deaths.

The hardest hit demographic groups continue to be the oldest and frailest, said Dr. Thomas Holland of Duke University.



In this Jan. 26, 2021, file photo, respiratory therapist Bailey Synhavong begins to put on protective equipment, which will include a face shield, gloves, gown, head cover and mask, before going into a patient's room in the COVID intensive care unit at UW Medical Center-Montlake in Seattle. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling across the United States, but deaths have remained stubbornly high. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, File)

When coronavirus first swept through the country, it was concentrated in nursing homes, prisons and other congregate care settings. It later spread more broadly.

"But deaths have still been concentrated among older patients and patients" with other health problems, Holland said. "Even as the pandemic has spread more broadly in the population, the demographics

of who dies from COVID has not really changed."

In Florida, for instance, 83 percent of deaths attributed to the virus have been in people 65 and older.

Still, that hasn't been enough to inspire some people to wear masks. A recent viral video from Oakes Farms Seed to Table, a local grocery store in Naples, Florida, showed both maskless customers and employees, chatting and laughing, without any social distancing.

Alfie Oakes, the store's owner, [told](#) NBC's "Today" show he knows masks do not work, and he does not believe the coronavirus has killed hundreds of thousands of people in the United States.



In this Jan. 5, 2021, file photo, cars line up for COVID-19 testing outside Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Fla. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling across the United States, but deaths have remained stubbornly high. (AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee, File)

"That's total hogwash," Oakes said, adding: "Why don't we shut the world down because of the heart attacks? Why don't we lock down cities because of heart attacks?"

He did not return a call from the AP on Thursday.

Public health experts are watching Florida closely this week, because the Super Bowl will be played in Tampa. City leaders and the NFL are trying to ensure social distancing by capping attendance at a third of the stadium's capacity—22,000 people. Still, there will be parties, events at bars and clubs, and other activities that draw people together.

While most people who become infected will recover, others face a much longer road. It can take a week or two to get sick enough to end up in the hospital. Then, those who are severely ill may end up in an ICU for many weeks, and some will die.

"The patients who don't do well are often in for these long and very stormy courses, and the patients who die, that's typically weeks into their hospital stay," Holland said.



In this Dec. 27, 2020, file photo, registered nurse Leslie Clark, left, collects a nasal swab sample from a woman who declined to give her name at a COVID-19 testing site in Los Angeles. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling across the United States, but deaths have remained stubbornly high. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)



In this Jan. 26, 2021, file photo, registered nurse Diane Miller stands in the "hot zone," defined by red tape on the floor, as she waits to exchange equipment with a colleague who will remain on the other side of the tape in the COVID acute care unit at UW Medical Center-Montlake in Seattle. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling across the United States, but deaths have remained stubbornly high. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, File)



In this Jan. 9, 2021, file photo, transporters Miguel Lopez, right, Noe Meza move a body of a COVID-19 patient to a morgue at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the Mission Hills section of Los Angeles. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling across the United States, but deaths have remained stubbornly high. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Treatments have evolved for COVID over time, but there have not been any "game-changing miracle treatments" on par with the development of the vaccine, Holland said.

"We've had things on the margin that are helpful," Holland said.

Among those, the use of steroids for patients who require oxygen, different ventilator strategies and preventing and managing blood clots.

There's also the use of monoclonal antibodies for outpatients early in their illness who do not need to be on oxygen, but who might be at higher risk of complications.

In addition, changes in testing have helped.

"Clearly, if people know they're infected, they're going to be more likely to do the things they need to do, like staying at home and quarantining or isolating," he said.

Looking forward, the big concern is how the virus is changing, shifting into new strains that are potentially more infectious and better able to evade antibody products or to make vaccines less effective.

"We've always been in a race," Holland said. "But it's a lot more obvious now that we're in a race to vaccinate people fast enough to slow down transmission, so that the virus has fewer opportunities to mutate and change and create these strain problems for us."

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Citation: US virus deaths surpass 450K; daily toll is stubbornly high (2021, February 4) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-virus-deaths-surpass-450k-daily.html>

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