

Delta variant driving COVID surge in South Africa

June 26 2021



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The highly contagious Delta variant is driving a surge in South African COVID-19 infections that is testing the capacity of hospitals and forcing authorities to mull tighter restrictions, the government and scientists said on Saturday.

The hardest-hit country in Africa recorded 18,762 new infections on Saturday—its highest daily figure since January—taking the total number of laboratory-confirmed cases to 1,895,905, of which 59,621 have been fatal.

The country is in the thick of its third wave.

"We are in the exponential phase of the pandemic with the numbers just growing very, very, extremely fast and (they) will keep growing in the next weeks," Tulio de Oliveira, a top virologist in the country said.

The Delta variant first seen in India now appears to be "dominating infections in South Africa," de Oliveira of the Network for Genomic Surveillance in South Africa told a virtual briefing.

Koleka Mlisana, the head of a government ministerial advisory committee on COVID-19, told the same briefing that there is "evidence that the Delta variant may actually be taking over".

To curb the spread, South African needs to "go to hard, tighter restrictions... and that needs to be done urgently," said Mlisana.

Acting Minister of Health, Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane said due to the prevalence of the Delta variant, the numbers of infections "are likely to surpass the second wave peak" in January.

Hospitals in the densely populated province of Gauteng—encompassing Johannesburg and Pretoria, and the nation's economic and industrial heartland—are "struggling severely", Mlisana said.

The province accounts for around 60 percent of national infections.

Medics are now starting to transport patients to other provinces where

there is still room in hospitals.

"We remain very worried about the rise in hospitalisation, which is putting a lot of strain on the healthcare system in the country," said the minister.

The country's [vaccination drive](#) has been slow and only around 2.4 million people have been immunised since February.

On Friday, thousands of opposition activists rallied in Pretoria to demand a faster coronavirus vaccination rollout.

President Cyril Ramaphosa is expected to broaden lockdown restrictions during an address to the nation scheduled for Sunday.

Health officials across the world have been alarmed by the rapid spread of the Delta variant.

The World Health Organization said on Friday that the Delta variant had reached at least 85 countries.

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Citation: Delta variant driving COVID surge in South Africa (2021, June 26) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-06-delta-variant-covid-surge-south.html>

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