

Researchers: Virus surge a 'raging forest fire' in Arkansas

July 20 2021, by Andrew Demillo



In this July 15, 2021 file photo, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson speaks during a town hall meeting in Texarkana, Ark. Public health researchers on Tuesday, July 20, 2021, called the rapid rise in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations in Arkansas a "raging forest fire," and the state's top health official warned that he expects significant outbreaks in schools. Credit: Kelsi Brinkmeyer/The Texarkana Gazette via AP, File

Public health researchers on Tuesday called the rapid rise in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations in Arkansas a "raging forest fire," and the state's top health official warned that he expects significant outbreaks in schools.

The [model by the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences' Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health](#) projected a daily average of 1,039 new cases over the next week. The model also predicted an average increase of 169 new cases per day in children under the age of 17.

Arkansas leads the country in new cases per capita, according to figures compiled by Johns Hopkins University researchers. The state also has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country, with only 35% of the population fully vaccinated.

"COVID is no longer smoldering. It has broken out into a raging forest fire that will grow in size and strength," according to the UAMS forecast. "We cannot stand still. We must act to reduce the consequences of this new surge to the extent possible."

The state's cases on Tuesday increased by 1,875 to 367,007 total since the pandemic began, the Department of Health said.

Dr. Jose Romero, the state's health secretary, said he was concerned about the possibility of a "surge on top of this surge" when school begins this fall. Laws enacted this year prevent schools from mandating face masks or from requiring students and teachers to be vaccinated.

"I expect to see this year significant outbreaks within the school system," Romero said during a virtual discussion on vaccine hesitancy held by U.S. News & World Report. "What's already telling me that's going to happen are the number of day care closures that have occurred because of outbreaks occurring, and camp exposures and closures occurring."

Romero said the key to combatting those outbreaks will be parents stressing the importance of wearing masks.

Dr. Bechara Choucair, the White House's vaccinations coordinator, visited Arkansas on Tuesday to meet with Romero, hospital leaders and other health officials. Choucair said the medical community will play the key role in countering misinformation that has fueled vaccine hesitancy in places like Arkansas.

"To be able to counter all of this misinformation with facts, with answers to people's most commonly asked questions, the opportunity for people to talk to their doctors to make sure they have the credible, scientific information is going to be really critical to help us deal with this level of misinformation that we're seeing," he said.

Gov. Asa Hutchinson earlier this month began holding town halls around the state aimed at addressing people who have so far resisted getting vaccinated, and he planned more of the forums next week.

The state's virus hospitalizations on Tuesday increased by 28 to 815, with 313 in intensive care and 131 on ventilators. UAMS Chancellor Dr. Cam Patterson said the increases are straining hospital resources.

"Our staffing is really stretched thin at this point," Patterson said. "It's not a matter of finding beds, it's a matter of finding people to take care of patients, whether they're COVID-19 positive or not."

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