'There are only so many beds': COVID-19 surge hits hospitals

August 5 2021, by Kelli Kennedy and Philip Marcelo

RN Zoe Zinis puts on fresh protective layers before entering the room of an infected patient in the COVID-19 ward at UF Health's downtown in Jacksonville, Fla., campus Friday, July 30, 2021. The second surge of COVID-19 infections in Jacksonville is stretching the capacity of area medical facilities to care for patients. Credit: Bob Self/The Florida Times-Union via AP

Florida hospitals slammed with COVID-19 patients are suspending elective surgeries and putting beds in conference rooms, an auditorium and a cafeteria. As of midweek, Mississippi had just six open intensive care beds in the entire state.

Georgia medical centers are turning people away. And in Louisiana, an organ transplant had to be postponed along with other procedures.

"We are seeing a surge like we've not seen before in terms of the patients coming," Dr. Marc Napp, chief medical officer for Memorial Healthcare System in Hollywood, Florida, said Wednesday. "It's the sheer number coming in at the same time. There are only so many beds, so many doctors, only so many nurses."

Coronavirus hospitalizations are surging again as the more contagious delta variant rages across the country, forcing medical centers to return to a crisis footing just weeks after many closed their COVID-19 wards and field hospitals and dropped other emergency measures.

The number of people now in the hospital in the U.S. with COVID-19 has almost quadrupled over the past month to nearly 45,000, turning the clock back to early March, [according to](#) the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That's still nowhere close to the nearly 124,000 people who were in the hospital at the very peak of the winter surge in January. But health experts say this wave is perhaps more worrying because it has risen more swiftly than prior ones. Also, a disturbingly large share of patients this time are young adults.

Carlos Anacleto closes his eyes as he receives the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine from nurse Jorge Tase, as others wait their turn, Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021, in Miami Beach, Fla. On Tuesday, the CDC added more than 50,000 new COVID-19 cases in the state over the previous three days, pushing the seven-day average to one the highest counts since the pandemic began, an eightfold increase since July 4. Credit: AP Photo/Marta Lavandier

And to the frustration of public health experts and front-line medical workers, the vast majority of those now hospitalized are unvaccinated.

Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi alone account for more than 40% of all hospitalizations in the country.

Mississippi has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the nation, with

less than 35% of its population fully inoculated, and Louisiana and Georgia aren't much better, at around 38%. Florida is closer to the national rate at 49%, but none of the four Southern states comes close to the New England region, where most states are well over 60%.

The variant has sent new U.S. cases surging to 94,000 a day on average, a level not seen since mid-February. Deaths per day have soared 75% in the past two weeks, climbing from an average of 244 to 426. The overall U.S. death toll stands at more than 614,000.

Francesca Anacleto, 12, receives her first Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine shot from nurse Jorge Tase, Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021, in Miami Beach, Fla. On Tuesday, the CDC added more than 50,000 new COVID-19 cases in the state over the previous three days, pushing the seven-day average to one the highest counts since the pandemic began, an eightfold increase since July 4. Credit: AP

Photo/Marta Lavandier

Across Florida, more than 12,500 patients were hospitalized with COVID-19 as of Thursday, over 2,500 of them in intensive care. The state is averaging nearly 18,000 newly confirmed infections per day, up from fewer than 2,000 a month ago. In all, Florida has recorded more than 39,100 coronavirus deaths.

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis has taken a hard line against mask rules and other compulsory measures, saying it is important to keep Florida's economy moving.

"Florida is a free state, and we will empower our people. We will not allow Joe Biden and his bureaucratic flunkies to come in and commandeer the rights and freedoms of Floridians," DeSantis, who has been exploring a possible bid for president in 2024, said in a fundraising email Wednesday.

The reversal in fortune at some hospitals has been stark.

Will Hartley, 10, Lila Hartley, 12, and Gabby Waxman hold their signs in support of masking in schools at a rally before Tuesday evening's school board building Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2021 in Jacksonville, Fla.. Around 50 people gathered outside the Duval County School Board building in support of having mandatory masking of teachers and students ahead of the school board taking up the issue in their Tuesday evening meeting. Florida's Gov. Ron DeSantis has forbidden mandating masks in Florida's public schools despite CDC recommendations to wear masks due to the recent surge of COVID-19 infections which are particularly high in Northeast Florida. Credit: Bob Self/The Florida Times-Union via AP

In central Florida, AdventHealth hospitals had 1,350 patients hospitalized with COVID-19 as of Thursday, the most ever. The health care system has postponed non-emergency surgery and limited visitors to

concentrate on treating coronavirus patients.

Less than two months ago, Miami's Baptist Hospital had fewer than 20 COVID-19 patients and was closing down coronavirus units. By Monday, hospital officials were reopening some of those units to handle an influx of more than 200 new virus patients.

"As fast as we are opening up units, they're being filled with COVID patients," said Dr. Sergio Segarra, the hospital's chief medical officer.

In Georgia, more than two dozen hospitals said this week that they have had to turn away patients as the number of hospitalizations for COVID-19 has risen to 2,600 statewide.

Lori Eisenberg-Castro and her daughter, Eyla, 8, participate in a pro-mask rally outside the school board building Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2021, in Jacksonville, Fla. Around 50 people gathered outside the Duval County School Board building in support of having mandatory masking of teachers and students ahead of the school board taking up the issue in their Tuesday evening meeting. Florida's Gov. Ron DeSantis has forbidden mandating masks in Florida's public schools despite CDC recommendations to wear masks due to the recent surge of COVID-19 infections which are particularly high in Northeast Florida. Credit: Bob Self/The Florida Times-Union via AP

Mississippi reported that its hospitals were overwhelmed with nearly 1,200 COVID-19 patients as of Thursday. State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs said the delta variant is "sweeping across Mississippi like a tsunami" with no end in sight.

In Louisiana, with roughly 2,350 coronavirus patients in hospitals, any non-emergency surgery that might require an overnight stay is being delayed at the state's largest hospital system. Dr. Robert Hart, chief medical officer at Ochsner Health, said an organ transplant involving a live donor was postponed.

"You can imagine the expectations both the recipient and the donor had leading up to the surgery, and then to have to put that off," he said, declining to disclose the type of transplant.
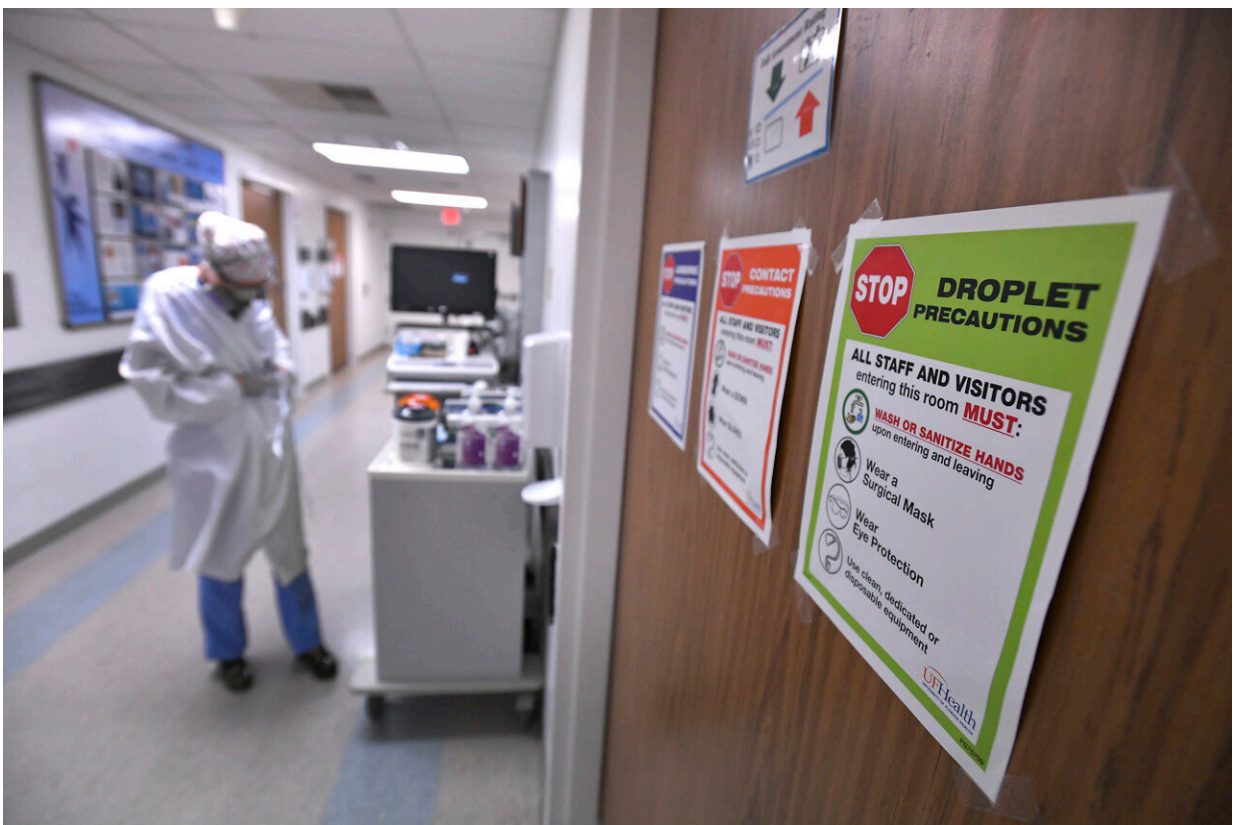
The swift turn of events has been disheartening for health care workers who just weeks ago thought the battle was in its final stages. The crisis is also making it harder for hospitals to provide other crucial types of medical care.

People line up to get the COVID-19 vaccine, Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021, in Miami Beach, Fla. On Tuesday, the CDC added more than 50,000 new COVID-19 cases in the state over the previous three days, pushing the seven-day average to one the highest counts since the pandemic began, an eightfold increase since July 4. Credit: AP Photo/Marta Lavandier

Signs on all the patient doors remind staff and visitors of precautions to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus in the COVID-19 ward at UF Health's downtown in Jacksonville, Fla., campus Friday, July 30, 2021. The second surge of COVID-19 infections in Jacksonville is stretching the capacity of area medical facilities to care for patients. Credit: Bob Self/The Florida Times-Union via AP

Wearing layers of protective gear, RN Taylor Perri prepares her equipment tray for the next patient as she works in the COVID-19 ward at UF Health's downtown in Jacksonville, Fla., campus Friday, July 30, 2021. The second surge of COVID-19 infections in Jacksonville is stretching the capacity of area medical facilities to care for patients. Credit: Bob Self/The Florida Times-Union via AP

In this undated photo provided by Memorial Healthcare System, a conference area is shown that has been turned into a COVID-19 unit at Memorial Hospital Miramar., in Miramar, Fla. With the much more contagious delta variant now spreading exponentially, Florida hit 11,515 hospitalized patients Tuesday, breaking last year's record for the third straight day and up from just 1,000 in mid-June. Credit: Memorial Healthcare System via AP

An individual wearing a face mask exits the Ouachita Parish Courthouse in Monroe, La., Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021. Signage at this and other parish offices emphasizes the necessity of wearing a face mask as Louisiana is reinstating a statewide mask mandate for both vaccinated and unvaccinated residents in all indoor locations, including schools and colleges as the state experiences the highest per capita COVID-19 growth in the nation, driven by the Delta variant and one of the country's lowest vaccination rates. Credit: AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis

"If you don't get vaccinated, you are taking resources from people who have diseases or injuries or illnesses," said Dr. Vincent Shaw, a family physician in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "COVID doesn't call people who have had strokes, who have had heart attacks, who have had other horrific or traumatic things happen and say, 'Y'all take the week off. I

am going to take over the ER and the ICU.'"

In Florida, Judi Custer said she and her husband did everything they were told to do to ward off the virus. The Fort Lauderdale retirees got vaccinated and wore masks, even when the rules were lifted. Still, they fell ill with COVID-19 a few weeks ago, and 80-year-old Doug Custer was hospitalized for five days.

Judy Custer said she still believes more people need to get vaccinated.

"We've had it long enough to know it is helping people, even if they get sick with it," she said. "You're less likely to be put on a ventilator. You're less likely to be hospitalized."

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