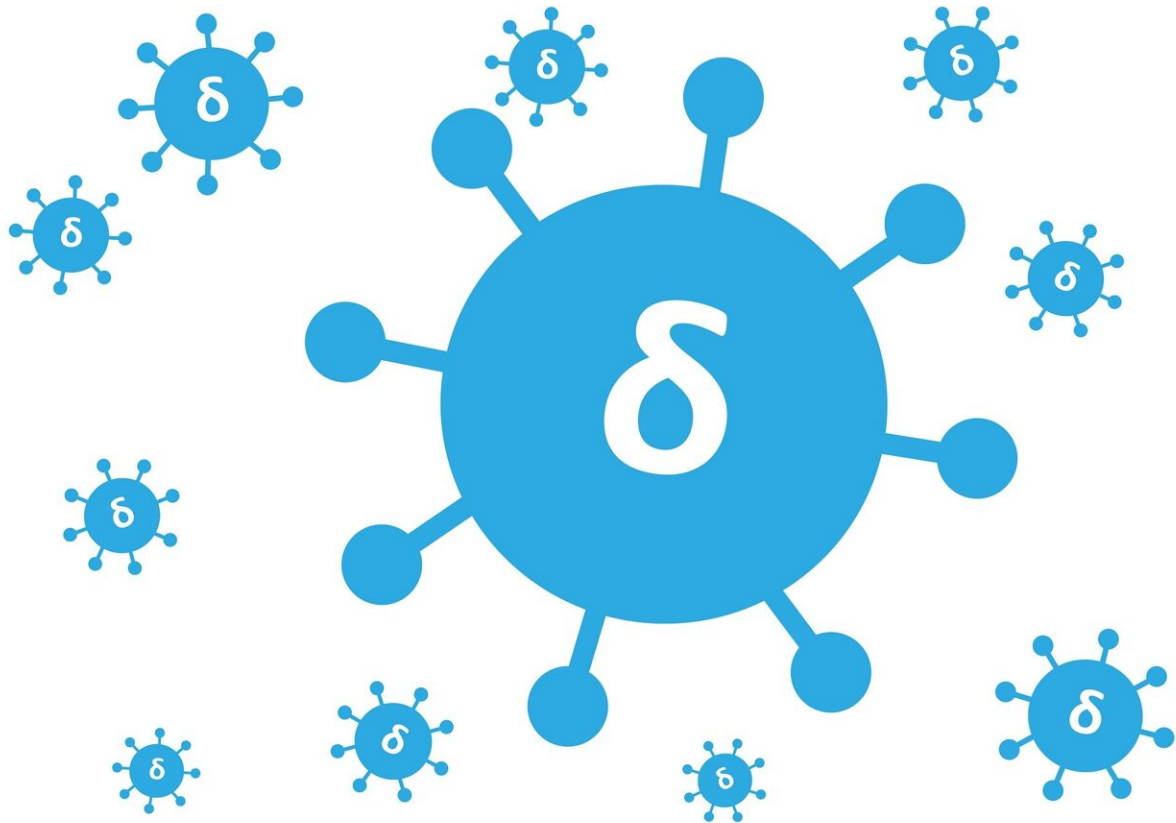


# In Florida, Delta variant fuels concerns for children's health

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Greater numbers of American children are being swept up in a wave of coronavirus infections driven by the Delta variant, causing renewed

anxiety for parents and a bitter political fight as schools prepare to reopen within weeks.

Much of the surge is concentrated in the southeastern state of Florida, where some school districts are defying an order by the Republican governor forbidding mask mandates, in the latest political twist in the health crisis.

"Parents are put into an impossible situation of having to choose between the health and life of their child and returning (to) school," said a lawsuit against the governor's order filed by parents of children with disabilities on Friday.

The majority of children who catch the coronavirus will have a mild or asymptomatic disease, and until recently they had not been a major focal point of the pandemic.

That's now changing with Delta, a variant that is as contagious as chickenpox and largely drove 72,000 pediatric cases in the week leading up to July 29, according to a new study by the American Academy of Pediatrics—a figure five times higher than in late June.

Nearly 20,000 of those cases were in Florida, according to state data.

The Sunshine State is also experiencing the highest number of hospitalizations for minors in the country—currently 143, which is ahead of Texas.

"We definitely have seen an increase in cases here, in our emergency department and also within the rest of the hospital, in the last two or three weeks," Dr. Marcos Mestre, medical director of Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami, told AFP.

## **Most contagious, likely more severe**

Only around one percent of children diagnosed with COVID-19 will be hospitalized, said Mestre, but complications are more likely for those with diabetes or who are overweight.

While studies have confirmed Delta is the most transmissible strain to date, there is uncertainty about whether it causes more severe disease.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director Rochelle Walensky said this week that while preliminary studies indicate it may be more serious in adults as well as children, further confirmatory research is needed.

What's so far clear is that northeastern parts of the United States that have driven down community transmission through high levels of adult vaccination are also seeing the lowest rates of pediatric infection. Children are least safe in areas of low adult vaccination.

With new cases surging to levels seen last summer, the CDC now recommends students, staff and all employees remain masked regardless of vaccination status to stem the spread of the airborne virus.

But Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis—who previously signed legislation banning businesses from using vaccine passports—is now threatening to cut funding for schools that follow scientific guidance and reimpose mask mandates.

## **Vaccines the way out**

Several [school districts](#) have announced plans to defy the governor anyway, including Broward County, the second-largest in the state.

The political fight has made its way to the White House, with President Joe Biden this week telling recalcitrant state leaders, "If you're not going to help, get out of the way."

"If you're coming after the rights of parents in Florida, I'm standing in your way," clapped back DeSantis.

Dr. Mobeen Rathore, a pediatric infectious diseases specialist who practices in Jacksonville and backs mask use at school, said it was wrong to downplay the risks to children.

Children "do get sick, they do get hospitalized, they do get into intensive care units and they do die of COVID," he told AFP.

Like adults, children will have to be vaccinated in the long run, he added.

The United States made vaccines available to over-12s in May, but the shots are still being tested for younger [children](#) and aren't likely to be authorized until at least the end of the year.

At a vaccination event held at the FTX Arena, home of the Miami Heat, 33-year-old Sara Medina told AFP the last year of online schooling had been "a little crazy," and she was glad the shot paved the way for her 12-year-old son Jayden to get back to the classroom.

Pediatricians strongly advocate for a [safe return](#) to in-person learning because of the social, mental health and educational benefits.

"Last year we had to stay home all the time, it was kind of getting boring at home," said Jayden.

"It's important to have (the mask) just in case, for all of us to be safe," he added.

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