

Tokyo logs record 5,042 cases as infections surge amid Games

August 5 2021, by Mari Yamaguchi



People wearing face masks to protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk under a water mist in Tokyo Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021. New cases surge in Tokyo to record levels during the Olympic Games. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

Tokyo reported 5,042 new coronavirus cases on Thursday, its most since

the pandemic began as infections surge in the Japanese capital hosting the Olympics.

Tokyo has been under a state of emergency since mid-July, and four other areas of the country have since been added. But the measures, basically shorter opening hours and a ban on alcohol for restaurants and bars, are increasingly ignored by the public, which has become tired of restrictions.

"We need to tackle the situation now that we have a stronger sense of urgency," Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga told reporters, referring to Tokyo exceeding 5,000 new daily cases for the first time. "The infections are expanding at a pace we have never experienced before."

Suga, who has been criticized for insisting on hosting the Olympics despite the coronavirus's surge, says there is no evidence linking the increase in cases to the July 23-Aug. 8 Games. He urged people to firmly stick to the emergency requests and stay at home during summer vacation.

The new cases brought Tokyo's reported total to 236,138. The entire country registered more than 14,000 new cases on Wednesday, for a 970,460 total.

Alarmed by the pace of the spread, some experts have called for the state of emergency to be expanded nationwide.



People wearing face masks to help protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk under a cooling water mist during the heat of the day in Tokyo Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

Instead, Suga on Thursday announced a milder version of the emergency measures in eight prefectures, including Fukushima in the east and Kumamoto in the south, beginning Monday. The less-stringent measures allow prefectural heads to target specific towns but do not allow them to order business closures.

Suga also pledged to "prevent the further spread of the virus by firmly carrying out vaccinations."

Experts say people are not cooperating because many feel less of a sense

of urgency about the pandemic while the Olympics are going ahead and the government's repeats of the same requests for people to stay at home.

Experts on a Tokyo metropolitan government panel cautioned that infections propelled by the more contagious delta variant have become "explosive" and could exceed 10,000 cases a day in two weeks.



People wearing face masks to help curb the spread of the coronavirus cross an intersection in Tokyo Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021. Tokyo reported 5,042 new daily coronavirus cases on Thursday, hitting a record since the pandemic began as the infections surge in the Japanese capital hosting the Olympics. Credit: AP Photo/Kantaro Komiya

Measures targeting business owners begin with requests and increase to orders, and violators can be fined, though this rarely happens. Those who comply can receive compensation, but thousands of eateries still stay open after the requested 8 p.m. closing time. Measures for the general public are only voluntary requests, including staying at home, wearing a mask outside and avoiding nonessential trips.

Japan has managed to keep its cases and deaths lower than much of the world, but testing is still insufficient and Tokyo's positivity rate stands at 20%, indicating widespread infections. Japan has 8.9 new confirmed cases per 100,000, compared to 8.5 in Vietnam and 28.4 in the United States.

In Tokyo, nearly 17,000 patients with mild symptoms are currently isolating at home—more than a tenfold increase from a month ago—and more than 10,000 others are waiting for beds in hospitals or special hotels.



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As hospital beds fill, Suga's government introduced a new policy this week in which coronavirus patients with moderate symptoms will isolate at home instead of in hospitals, an attempt to save hospital beds almost exclusively for seriously ill patients.

Opposition lawmakers criticized Suga for not increasing hospital capacity sufficiently despite warnings about the delta variant. Coronavirus treatment in Japan is limited to public and university

hospitals that have adequate facilities and expertise.

Dr. Masataka Inokuchi, the vice chair of the Tokyo Medical Association, said he hopes to establish a system that allows patients to isolate safely at home. "This system, however, will collapse if the number of patients at home keeps rising," he said.

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Citation: Tokyo logs record 5,042 cases as infections surge amid Games (2021, August 5) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-08-tokyo-cases-infections-surge-games.html>

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