

# 'The fire that's here': US is still battling delta variant

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Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines sit ready for use at a Dallas County Health and Human Services drive up vaccine site in Mesquite, Texas, Nov. 30, 2021. While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant, the delta form of the coronavirus isn't finished wreaking havoc in the U.S. There is much that is unknown about omicron, including whether it is more contagious than previous versions, makes people sicker or more easily thwarts the vaccine or breaks through the immunity that people get from a bout of COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/LM Otero, File

While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant, the delta form of the coronavirus isn't finished wreaking havoc in the U.S., sending record numbers of patients to the hospital in some states, especially in the Midwest and New England.

"Omicron is a spark that's on the horizon. Delta variant is the fire that's here today," said Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the state Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Maine, where a record 334 people were in the hospital with COVID-19 as of midweek.

The U.S. recorded its first known omicron infection on Wednesday, in a fully vaccinated person who had returned to California from South Africa, where the variant was first identified just over a week ago.

A second U.S. case was confirmed Thursday in Minnesota, involving a vaccinated man who had attended an anime convention in New York City just before Thanksgiving that drew an estimated 50,000 people. That would suggest the variant has begun to spread within the U.S.

But there is much that is unknown about omicron, including whether it is more contagious than previous versions, makes people sicker or more easily thwarts the vaccine or breaks through the immunity that people get from a bout of COVID-19.

For now, the extra-contagious delta variant accounts for practically all cases in the U.S. and continues to inflict misery at a time when many hospitals are struggling with shortages of nurses and a backlog of patients undergoing procedures that had been put off early in the pandemic.



Licensed practical nurse Yokasta Castro, of Warwick, R.I., draws a Moderna COVID-19 vaccine into a syringe at a mass vaccination clinic, May 19, 2021, at Gillette Stadium, in Foxborough, Mass. While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant, the delta form of the coronavirus isn't finished wreaking havoc in the U.S. There is much that is unknown about omicron, including whether it is more contagious than previous versions, makes people sicker or more easily thwarts the vaccine or breaks through the immunity that people get from a bout of COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Steven Senne, File

The fear is that omicron will foist even more patients, and perhaps sicker ones, onto hospitals.

"For me, it's really just, I can't imagine," said Dr. Natasha Bhuyan, a family physician in Phoenix. "Are we going to see another surge in cases



that's even higher than what we're seeing now? What will that do to our health system? What will that do to our hospitals?"

Two years into the outbreak, COVID-19 has killed over 780,000 Americans, and deaths are running at about 900 per day.

COVID-19 cases and deaths in the U.S. have dropped by about half since the delta peak in August and September, but at about 86,000 new infections per day, the numbers are still worrisomely high, especially heading into the holidays, when people travel and gather with family.

With the onset of cold weather sending more people indoors, hospitals are feeling the strain.



An information sign is displayed as a child arrives with her parent to receive the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for children 5 to 11-years-old at London Middle School in Wheeling, Ill., Nov. 17, 2021. While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant, the delta form of the coronavirus isn't finished wreaking havoc in the U.S. There is much that is unknown about omicron, including whether it is more contagious than previous versions, makes people sicker or more easily thwarts the vaccine or breaks through the immunity that people get from a bout of COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh, File

"Delta is not subsiding," said Dr. Andre Kalil, an infectious-disease physician at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Nebraska on Tuesday reported 555 people in the [hospital](#) with COVID-19—the highest number since last December, when the vaccine rollout was just beginning.

Vermont recorded its highest total since the start of the pandemic: 84. New Hampshire, once an early vaccination leader, is now second only to Michigan in the most new cases per capita over the past two weeks.

In Minnesota, which ranks third for most new cases per capita, the Pentagon sent medical teams last month to two major hospitals to relieve doctors and nurses swamped by COVID-19 patients.

"This fourth wave, I can pretty clearly state, has hit Minnesota harder than any of the previous ones," said Dr. Timothy Johnson, president of the Minnesota chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

He said hospitals are struggling because of a combination of a lack of nurses, fatigue and patients undergoing treatments that had to be postponed earlier in the crisis. "Now those chickens are coming home to roost a little bit," he said.



Visitors walk around a memorial for victims of COVID-19 at the Griffith Observatory, Nov. 19, 2021, in Los Angeles. While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant, the delta form of the coronavirus isn't finished wreaking havoc in the U.S. Credit: AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File

At Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis, where one of the military medical teams was sent, the number of COVID-19 patients has doubled since September, although it remains below pandemic highs, spokeswoman Christine Hill said.

"And it's concerning with the holidays coming up," she said.

Dr. Pauline Park, who takes care of critically ill patients at the



University of Michigan Health in Ann Arbor, called the latest surge "heartbreaking." One COVID-19 patient, a woman in her 20s, died the week of Thanksgiving. Another, a mother with young children, is on a machine built to take over for her lungs.

Arizona, where students in dozens of classrooms have been forced into quarantine, reported over 3,100 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday, numbers similar to the disastrous summer of 2020. Hospital bed space has fallen to pandemic lows.

Bhuyan said a patient of hers with a blood clot in a lung was discharged instead of being admitted. Other patients are waiting hours in the emergency room.



A traveler adjusts his face mask as he walks through the arrivals area at the Los Angeles International Airport in Los Angeles, Nov. 30, 2021. While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant, the delta form of the coronavirus isn't finished wreaking havoc in the U.S. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File

"It's just hard because it does feel like that we are actually going backwards in time, even though we have these vaccines, which are such a great weapon for us," she said.

While more than two dozen countries worldwide have reported omicron infections, including India on Thursday, the numbers are small outside of South Africa, which has confirmed more than 170 cases. World health authorities have yet to link any deaths to omicron.

The [delta variant](#) is still causing deep turmoil in Europe, too, including Germany and Austria. South Korea is also seeing a delta-driven surge that has pushed hospitalizations and deaths to record highs.

On Thursday, Germany, where new COVID-19 infections topped 70,000 in a 24-hour period, barred the unvaccinated from nonessential stores and cultural and recreational sites. Lawmakers are expected to take up a general vaccine mandate in the coming weeks. Austria, meanwhile, extended its lockdown.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the measures are necessary because hospitals could become overloaded: "The situation in our country is serious."

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