

Omicron sweeps across nation, now 73% of new US COVID cases

December 21 2021, by Mike Stobbe



Travelers wait for a shuttle but to arrive at the Los Angeles International Airport in Los Angeles, Monday, Dec. 20, 2021. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health reported more than 3,500 new cases of COVID-19 on Sunday as the number of daily new cases tripled over the week. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Omicron has raced ahead of other variants and is now the dominant version of the coronavirus in the U.S., accounting for 73% of new infections last week, federal health officials said Monday.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention numbers showed nearly a six-fold increase in [omicron](#)'s share of infections in only one week.

In much of the country, it's even higher. Omicron is responsible for an estimated 90% or more of new infections in the New York area, the Southeast, the industrial Midwest and the Pacific Northwest. The national rate suggests that more than 650,000 omicron infections occurred in the U.S. last week.

Since the end of June, the [delta variant](#) had been the main version causing U.S. infections. As recently as the end of November, more than 99.5% of coronaviruses were delta, according to CDC data.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said the new numbers reflect the kind of growth seen in other countries.

"These numbers are stark, but they're not surprising," she said.

Scientists in Africa first sounded the alarm about omicron less than a month ago and on Nov. 26 the World Health Organization designated it as a "variant of concern." The mutant has since shown up in about 90 countries.



Becky Gonzalez, left, and her long time friend, Mary Lou Samora, a 71-year-old COVID-19 patient, put their palms together after they shared some encouraging words at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Los Angeles, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Much about the omicron variant remains [unknown](#), including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a booster shot for the best chance at preventing omicron [infection](#) but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

"All of us have a date with omicron," said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. "If you're going to interact with society, if you're going to have any type of life, omicron

will be something you encounter, and the best way you can encounter this is to be fully vaccinated."

Adalja said he was not surprised by the CDC data showing omicron overtaking delta in the U.S., given what was seen in South Africa, the U.K. and Denmark. He predicted spread over the [holidays](#), including breakthrough infections among the vaccinated and serious complications among the unvaccinated that could stress hospitals already burdened by delta.

Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, said other countries had seen omicron's fast growth, but the U.S. data showed "a remarkable jump in such a short time."

Topol also said it's unclear how much milder omicron really is compared with other variants. "That's the big uncertainty now."



City residents wait in a line extending around the block to receive free at-home rapid COVID-19 test kits in Philadelphia, Monday, Dec. 20, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Rourke

CDC's estimates are based on thousands of coronavirus specimens collected each week through university and commercial laboratories and state and local health departments. Scientists analyze their genetic sequences to determine which versions of the COVID-19 viruses are most abundant.

On Monday, the CDC revised its estimate for omicron cases for the week that ended Dec. 11, after analyzing more samples. About 13% of the cases that week were from omicron, not the 3% previously reported. The week before, omicron accounted for just 0.4% of cases.

CDC officials said they do not yet have estimates of how many hospitalizations or deaths are due to omicron.

Though there remain a lot of new infections caused by the delta [variant](#), "I anticipate that over time that [delta](#) will be crowded out by omicron," Walensky said.

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Citation: Omicron sweeps across nation, now 73% of new US COVID cases (2021, December 21) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-omicron-nation-covid-cases.html>

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