

Despite Omicron surge, S.Africa so far sees mild symptoms

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Omicron is fueling a steep surge in infections in South Africa but relatively few people are being hospitalised, experts said Thursday, as patients so far reported mild symptoms.

The country recorded 11,535 new cases Thursday, mostly in the

epicenter Gauteng, the province home to the biggest city Johannesburg and the capital Pretoria.

That's five times as many cases as were reported just one week ago, when South African scientists alerted the world to the new variant.

Three quarters of new cases in South Africa are now Omicron.

But deaths and hospitalisations so far are rising at a much lower rate.

Experts caution that there is still much to learn, but credit vaccinations with preventing more cases of severe illness.

"There is an increase in COVID-19 admissions, but not to the point we have seen" in previous outbreaks, said Mary Kawonga, a doctor who heads a provincial COVID advisory council.

"Hospitalisations are increasing by a much lower rate than the cases and at much lower rate than we saw in the third wave," she told a news conference.

That's partly because many of the [infected people](#) are young, and [younger people](#) have generally shown milder symptoms throughout the pandemic.

While only about one in four South Africans are fully vaccinated, the rates are higher among [older people](#) who are mostly prone to suffer serious illness if they become infected.

"We believe the number of cases will increase exponentially in all provinces of the country," said Anne von Gottberg, an expert at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.

"We believe that vaccines will still however protect against severe disease," she added.

But so far, many cases only suffer a headache or [runny nose](#)—and sometimes nothing at all.

Mild symptoms

Jessica Willmore, 38, developed a [sore throat](#) and a cough on Thursday.

The following day she had a headache, was fatigued and lost her appetite.

By the end of the weekend, she "felt washed out", had a runny nose and stomach cramps, although her appetite was back.

The only reason she took a COVID test was because she was due to attend a family member's 40th birthday party this week. They'd planned to top it off with safari to the Kruger National Park.

Two weeks back, her nine-year-old daughter returned from school with a sore throat and runny nose, but the symptoms cleared overnight.

"We don't know if it is Omicron or not," said Willmore.

Donovan Rothner, 42, was asymptomatic until he took a pre-surgery test which turned out positive.

"If it wasn't for that procedure, I wouldn't even know that I have that virus, and that would put a lot of people at risk," said Rothner.

A 44-year-old advertising practitioner had to get tested after her eight-year-old daughter suddenly developed a high fever, followed by another

of her daughters.

Then it was her turn, a slightly scratchy throat, accompanied by dizziness.

"Then I knew I had it," she said. But the vaccinated mother is relieved that the symptoms are "incredibly mild, like a head cold. I have all my sense of smell, my taste."

Rush for tests

Omicron fears have created a rush on clinics and laboratories.

On Thursday, dozens of people lined up under the midday sun outside shipping containers converted into specimen collection sites in front of a private hospital in Johannesburg's lofty suburb of Sandton.

Others sat on the pavement waiting their turn.

"The numbers are growing this week," said a nurse collecting samples.

Many people queueing said they had no symptoms but had been in contact with people that later tested positive.

Darienne Hallas, a data scientist, 40, sought a test after work colleagues were diagnosed with COVID and she became "extremely tired" in recent days.

"I don't feel very stressed because I have had people (around me) recently that tested positive. They didn't feel as bad" as feared.

Omicron "doesn't sound as bad on the lungs," she said.

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