

Under flood of Omicron cases, Texans scramble to find COVID tests

January 9 2022



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Texans seeking COVID tests are finding long lines and sold-out pharmacies, as the Lone Star State grapples with a new, Omicron-induced wave of the virus—the largest since the pandemic began.

When asked about their supply of at-home COVID-19 tests, a Walgreens

clerk in the area around Houston, the economic capital of Texas, replied: "We're sold out since this morning."

"You can come back in six days," said the pharmacy chain employee.

At the competitor chain CVS, and elsewhere, the situation is the same.

The need for testing is so high that people sometimes have to wait for hours at large, dedicated facilities.

In the far-west Texas city of El Paso, the local ABC television channel reported that the wait to get tested Thursday at one of the city's "mega-sites" was between three and five hours.

The Omicron wave is hitting Texas hard: the state registered nearly 54,000 positive cases on Friday, much higher than the daily peaks of around 20,000 cases in January and September last year.

The lack of tests has been one of the biggest critiques of President Joe Biden's handling of the pandemic, which his administration has recently doubled down on addressing.

At the end of December, Biden announced the government would send 500 million at-home tests to Americans, and on Friday, the White House said it had taken a major step toward achieving that goal by signing its first contract—worth \$51.6 million—with the company Goldbelt Security.

New testing 'mega-sites'

Faced with growing case numbers and demand for testing, local Texas authorities have decided to open more testing sites, such as in San Antonio, where the positivity rate climbed from two to 27 percent in two

weeks, according to the mayor.

In Houston, a city of 2.3 million, officials say they are able to test 30,000 people a day with the help of two additional drive-through "mega-sites."

Newly-arrived to Texas, Aaron McKenzie manages one of the sites.

"I am from the sunny state of Florida," he explained, "and with a team of 75 nurses, doctors, medical technologists, (we are) here performing these nasal swabs on Houstonians."

McKenzie and his team swabbed more than 600 people on Thursday, and 1,000 more every day since.

The added tests will hopefully meet the high demand in Houston, where the positivity rate is currently at 30 percent, according to McKenzie.

Slow results

Under a gloomy sky Friday morning in Houston, dozens of cars crawled from one registration stand to the next, waiting their turn to get a PCR test without leaving their car.

One driver, Alvaro Ayalla, is showing symptoms of COVID-19. He is worried he will have to miss work replacing home water filtration systems, which requires him to visit a handful of houses each day.

Many people have come with their children, with one father worried because he lacks [health insurance](#).

Another parent, Eunice Chang, tells AFP that her son's school wants all students and staff to get tested, "to be safe."

"And they do not want the home tests, they want the PCR [test](#)," she adds.

Chang has been promised results within 48 hours, but many provider miss that deadline, forcing residents to seek out rapid antigen tests, which can cost more than \$120.

In Dallas, the long lines for testing and lengthy delays in getting back results have prompted GeneIQ, one of the large labs in charge of testing on university campuses, to say they will hire new employees.

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Citation: Under flood of Omicron cases, Texans scramble to find COVID tests (2022, January 9) retrieved 13 August 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-omicron-cases-texans-scramble-covid.html>

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