

Hospitals begin to limp out of the latest COVID-19 surge

February 8 2022, by Heather Hollingsworth and Dave Kolpack



A person walks between buildings at the University of Kansas Hospital Friday, Jan. 28, 2022, in Kansas City, Kan. Hospitalizations fueled by the highly contagious omicron variant have begun falling after peaking at record levels in some communities. But doctors are warning that the wave is leaving behind more deferred surgeries and an increasingly worn out health care workforce in its wake. Credit: AP Photo/Charlie Riedel, File

As omicron numbers drop at Denver Health, Dr. Anuj Mehta is

reminded of the scene in the 1980 comedy "The Blues Brothers" when John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd pile out of a battered car after a police chase.

Suddenly, all the doors pop off the hinges, the front wheels fall off and smoke pours from the engine.

"And that's my fear," said Mehta, a pulmonary and critical care physician. "I'm worried that as soon as we stop, everything's just going to fall apart."

Across the U.S., the number of people in the [hospital](#) with COVID-19 has tumbled more than 28% over the past three weeks to about 105,000 on average, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But the ebbing of the omicron surge has left in its wake postponed surgeries, exhausted staff members and uncertainty over whether this is the last big wave or whether another one lies ahead.

"What we want to see is that the omicron surge continues to decrease, that we don't see another variant of concern emerge, that we start to come out of the other side of this," said Dr. Chris Beyrer, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

But he added: "We've been proven wrong twice already, with delta and omicron. So that adds to people's anxiety and uncertainty and sense of like 'When does this end?'"

Another reason for anxiety: COVID-19 hospitalizations aren't even all that low. They are at a level seen in January 2021, amid last winter's surge.

Hospitals limped through the omicron surge with workforces that already were depleted after many staff members quit the profession. The remaining health care workers got sick in droves. In some hospitals, office staff was assigned to help make beds.



A room is empty in the COVID-19 Intensive Care Unit at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center sits empty, in Lebanon, N.H., Monday, Jan. 3, 2022. Hospitalizations fueled by the highly contagious omicron variant have begun falling after peaking at record levels in some communities. But doctors are warning that the wave is leaving behind more deferred surgeries and an increasingly worn out health care workforce in its wake. Credit: AP Photo/Steven Senne, File

Now, many hospitals are still in crisis mode, as they work to reschedule people whose hip replacements and even cancer and brain surgeries were put off during the omicron crisis to free up bed space and nurses to care for COVID-19 patients.

Even in North Dakota, which has consistently ranked near the top in the number of COVID-19 cases relative to the population, hospitals have seen a dramatic drop in virus patients. However, executives at Dakotas-based Sanford Health said their hospitals are still full.

"We've been running hard for a couple years here now, but I am not sure that I sense relief," said Dr. Doug Griffin, a [vice president](#) and medical officer for Sanford in Fargo, North Dakota. "Most of our caregivers are giving care to other patients. We still have some very, very [sick people](#) coming in for all sorts of reasons."

At the Cleveland Clinic's 13 Ohio hospitals, the number of patients with COVID-19 has fallen to 280, down from an all-time pandemic high of around 1,200. Surgeries began to be delayed at the end of December, and the situation is just now returning to normal, said Dr. Raed Dweik, head of the system's respiratory institute.

The hope, he said, is that this is the last big surge and that the hospitals can begin to catch up.

"We've had our hopes dashed before that. 'Oh, this is the end of the pandemic and this virus,'" he said. "Every time we we say something like this, it's kind of laughed at us, and it comes back with a new variant."

Dr. Craig Spencer, a New York City emergency room physician, tweeted a week ago: "Just worked 12 hours in the ER on a busy Monday and didn't have a single Covid patient. Not one. This ain't over. But it's a helluva lot better than even just a few weeks ago."

Spencer said Tuesday that he had another COVID-free shift during the overnight hours Friday and Saturday.

"I am getting a somewhat random sample, of course, but just compared to a month ago, it's a complete sea change, which is great," he said.



In this Sept. 10, 2021 file photo an emergency department sign is photographed at Kootenai Health, in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Hospitalizations fueled by the highly contagious omicron variant have begun falling after peaking at record levels in some communities. But doctors are warning that the wave is leaving behind more deferred surgeries and an increasingly worn out health care workforce in its wake. Credit: AP Photo/Young Kwak,File

Mary Turner, who is president of the Minnesota Nurses Association and works as a COVID-19 ICU nurse, said patient numbers remain high because "of all the other people who didn't go to their appointments or their follow-ups who are coming in with all the other conditions."

If there is any relief, Turner said, it's being able to walk into a patient's room without having to wear full protective gear.

"It's like heaven" to walk in and just don a pair of gloves, she said.

At the eight-hospital Beaumont Health system in Michigan, the number of COVID-19 patients fell to 250 on Tuesday, down from last month's omicron peak of 851.

Dr. Justin Skrzynski, an internal medicine physician who runs a COVID-19 floor at Beaumont Health's hospital in Royal Oak, said patient care is about 90% back to normal and he finds reason for optimism, noting that the combination of vaccinations and immunity from infections should provide some protection.

But he noted: "I think there needs to be a lot of awareness of how much a lot of health care has degenerated."

He said nurses subjected to abuse from patients have left the profession in large numbers. Costs have risen.

"Right now, there's so much that we're doing to prop up the health care system financially," he said, noting the billions of dollars that the federal stimulus package provided to help hospitals deal with the pandemic.

"Unfortunately, once the dust settles, I think all these things are going to come due."

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