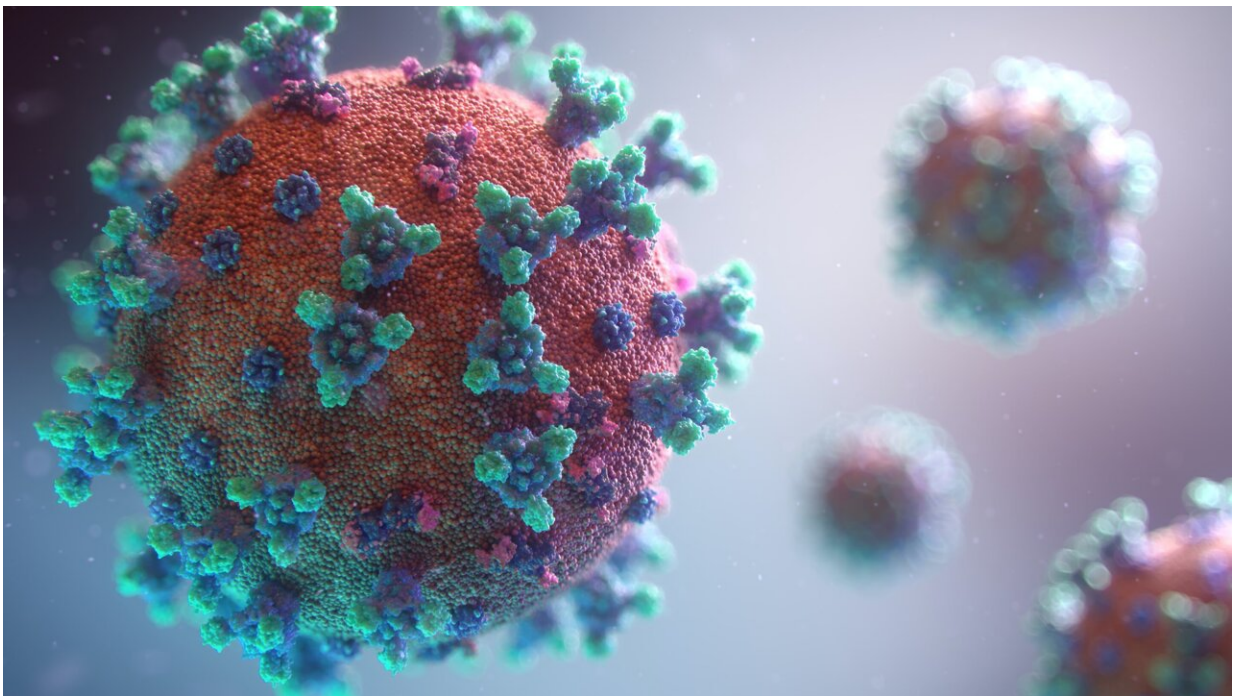


Up to 70% of Shanghai population infected with COVID: top doctor

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A senior doctor at one of Shanghai's top hospitals has said 70 percent of the megacity's population may have been infected with COVID-19 during China's huge surge in cases, state media reported Tuesday.

The steep rise in infections came after years of hardline restrictions were abruptly loosened last month with little warning or preparation, and

quickly overwhelmed hospitals and crematoriums.

Chen Erzhen, [vice president](#) at Ruijin Hospital and a member of Shanghai's COVID expert advisory panel, estimated that the majority of the city's 25 million people may have been infected.

"Now the spread of the epidemic in Shanghai is very wide, and it may have reached 70 percent of the population, which is 20 to 30 times more than (in April and May)," he told Dajiangdong Studio, owned by the Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily.

Shanghai suffered a gruelling two-month lockdown from April, during which over 600,000 residents were infected and many were hauled to mass quarantine centres.

But now the Omicron variant is spreading rampantly across the city.

In other major cities, including Beijing, Tianjin, Chongqing and Guangzhou, Chinese health officials have suggested that the wave has already peaked.

In neighbouring Zhejiang province, disease control authorities said Tuesday that there had been one million new infections in recent days and that the province was entering a peak plateau for COVID.

Chen added that his Shanghai [hospital](#) was seeing 1,600 [emergency admissions](#) daily—double the number prior to restrictions being lifted—with 80 percent of them COVID patients.

"More than 100 ambulances arrive at the hospital every day," he was quoted as saying, adding that around half of emergency admissions were [vulnerable people](#) aged over 65.

At Tongren Hospital in downtown Shanghai, AFP reporters saw patients receiving emergency [medical attention](#) outside the entrance of the overcrowded emergency ward on Tuesday.

The corridors overflowed with dozens of elderly patients lying on beds crammed together, hooked up to IV drips. Some patients wore oxygen masks attached to bedside canisters.

'Enormous challenge'

Chinese officials are readying for a virus wave to hit China's underresourced rural interior, as millions of people prepare to travel back to their hometowns for the week-long Lunar New Year public holiday beginning January 21.

In an interview with state broadcaster CCTV on Monday, National Health Commission (NHC) official Jiao Yahui admitted that dealing with the expected peak in [rural areas](#) would be an "enormous challenge".

"What we are most worried about is in the past three years nobody has returned home for Lunar New Year but they finally can this year," said Jiao.

"As a result, there may be a retaliatory surge of urban residents into the countryside to visit their relatives, so we are even more worried about the rural epidemic."

She also acknowledged pressure on hospital emergency departments and promised that authorities would coordinate medical resources to ensure treatment of patients in underfunded areas.

Meanwhile, around a dozen countries have imposed COVID testing restrictions on passengers from China after Beijing announced its

borders would reopen from January 8.

Countries including the United States have also cited Beijing's lack of transparency around infection data and the risk of new variants as a reason to restrict travellers.

China has only recorded 22 COVID deaths since December and has dramatically narrowed the criteria for classifying such deaths.

But Jiao told reporters on Thursday that China had always published data "on COVID-19 deaths and severe cases in the spirit of openness and transparency".

"China has always been committed to the scientific criteria for judging COVID-19 deaths, from beginning to end, which are in line with the international criteria," Jiao said.

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