

COVID infections are on the rise in Florida: What to know as new variants circulate

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Florida is one of 39 states that is seeing an increase or likely seeing an increase in COVID infections, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC no longer tracks cases and is relying on ER visits, hospitalizations and wastewater data to gauge the COVID situation. And

while nationwide data shows that influenza and RSV levels remain low in the U.S, COVID infections are increasing. South Florida hospitals say they're seeing more people sick with COVID too, though it's not like previous summers.

"We're seeing a slight increase in the number of COVID positive patients hospitalized and in the ER but it's not dramatic compared to when we had the surges in the past," said Dr. Paula Eckardt, the chief of infectious diseases at Memorial Healthcare System, the public hospital system in southern Broward County.

Here's what to know:

What is the dominant COVID variant?

COVID's alphabet soup continues to grow. And the most dominant variant in the country is KP.3, which is estimated to make up about 33% of the country's cases, according to the CDC's most recent estimates. It's followed by KP.2, which makes up about 21% of cases. And scientists are closely watching LB.1, which has accelerated this month and could be on track to overtake its siblings soon.

All three descend from omicron and are offshoots of JN.1, which fueled much of the country's winter infections. The people most at risk for severe COVID infections continue to be seniors 65 and older and people who are immunocompromised.

"There is currently no evidence that KP.3 or LB.1 cause more [severe disease](#)," CDC spokesperson David Daigle told CBS News. "CDC will continue to track SARS-CoV-2 variants and is working to better understand the potential impact on public health."

Are COVID vaccines still effective?

While COVID vaccines should still provide some protection against the virus, studies show that the existing shots appear to be less effective against the currently circulating variants, according to CNN. But new vaccines are expected to roll out in the fall.

An advisory committee for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is recommending that Pfizer and Moderna update their vaccine formulas for the fall again, similar to how flu shots are updated annually.

This time, the FDA wants the new shots to better match JN.1 and its descendants, like KP.2 and KP.3, which are also known as FLiRT variants. (The nickname isn't scientists being funny, rather, it's based on the technical names of their mutations, according to Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health).

What is the COVID situation in the country? What about in South Florida?

COVID-related ER visits have risen in the past week in the U.S., with a 25% increase in hospitalizations from May 26 to June 1, the most recent CDC data shows. Recent state health data also shows that more people have begun to test positive for COVID in Florida since late May, including in Miami-Dade and Broward counties.

It's difficult to say how many people are currently ill with COVID. Remember, COVID testing is no longer the best way to measure the disease spread since test sites are mostly gone and at-home test results don't get reported. COVID hospitalizations remain a key indicator of the COVID situation.

At Jackson Health System, Miami-Dade's public hospital system, there was "an all-time low number of inpatient cases" during April and May. The hospital said it began to see an uptick again in June, though it's not enough to affect operations.

Memorial Healthcare System in Broward as also noticed a slight uptick in COVID cases recently. But the hospital is not seeing as many sick people as before, and doctors have a better grasp on how to treat patients too, said Eckardt. Like other hospitals, Memorial is also no longer testing every admitted patient for COVID.

The hospital says it has 91 inpatient COVID cases, about a 38% increase since the end of May, when it had 66 inpatient COVID cases, according to the most recent data.

Tips to stay healthy

The scorching heat is likely encouraging people to stay indoors, which could be helping the virus circulate. People are also traveling for the summer.

As people start making their July Fourth holiday and travel plans, Eckardt said it's important to remember four key tips:

- Stay up-to-date with COVID vaccines.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- Consider wearing a mask if you're planning to be in a crowded area, especially if you're immunocompromised.
- If you feel sick, get tested and seek treatment, if needed.

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