

# COVID-19 on the upswing in Chicago again this summer

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If it seems like you suddenly know a lot of people with COVID-19 this summer, it's not just you.

COVID-19 is again on the rise in the Chicago area and across the country—the fourth consecutive summer the nation has experienced an upswing.

"It hasn't gone away," said Dr. Robert Murphy, executive director of the Havey Institute for Global Health and a professor of medicine in infectious diseases at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "We are personally seeing a large jump in the number of cases, and the number of prescriptions we're calling in for Paxlovid, the treatment that's available."

COVID-19 test positivity was up to 9.8% in Chicago for the week that ended July 13, compared with 2.5% for the week that ended June 1, according to the Chicago Department of Public Health. And over the past three weeks, COVID-19 viral levels in wastewater have been increasing at eight of 11 Chicago sewersheds being monitored, according to the department.

Nationally, COVID-19 viral levels in wastewater are high, and test positivity was up to 12.6% for the week that ended July 13, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On the West Coast, test positivity was at 16.4% for that same week.

Local health systems have also noticed the increase. The labs for Edward and Elmhurst hospitals saw 256 positive COVID-19 tests for the week that ended July 20, compared with 66 at the beginning of June, said Dr. Jonathan Pinsky, medical director of infection control at Endeavor Health Edward Hospital in Naperville.

Pinsky said he's "not particularly surprised about it," given that there were similar increases during past summers. It's also likely many sick people aren't even testing, doctors say.

It's not entirely clear why COVID-19 cases keep rising during the summer months—a time typically associated with lower levels of respiratory illnesses. But doctors say it might have to do with waning immunity from vaccines, which many people received in the fall, and ongoing mutations to the virus. Virus strains known as FLiRT variants are responsible for most of the cases at the moment nationwide, according to the CDC.

"The [influenza virus](#) doesn't do well in summer months. It doesn't survive well, and doesn't transmit well," Pinsky said. "I think this virus is different. The transmission is definitely higher in the winter, but something about the virus still allows transmission during summer months."

The good news is that this summer's increase is still nowhere near the magnitude of major surges during the early years of the pandemic. It also seems to be significantly smaller than the wave of COVID-19 this past winter.

"There might be a slight increase in the number of patients, but it's nothing to really write home about," said Dr. Michael Cui, a primary care doctor at Rush Primary, Virtual First in Chicago. He said he's seen a 10% to 15% increase in Paxlovid prescriptions recently. "It's not the massive surge where one day we have one or two patients and the next day we have 30 patients. ... We're just not seeing the floodgates open."

More good news: Though hospitalizations across the country have been creeping upward in recent weeks, they still remain relatively low, as do deaths from COVID-19. That's likely thanks, in part, to the fact that nearly everyone has some level of immunity to the illness now, either because they already had it, because of vaccinations or both, doctors say.

"The severity of infections is significantly lower," Pinsky said. "It's

unusual for patients to develop really severe levels of infection where they require oxygen or ICU care, much less frequently than we saw two years ago."

People who are immunocompromised or have certain underlying health conditions, however, are still at-risk for more [severe illness](#) and may want to continue taking precautions such as masking and avoiding crowds, Murphy said.

Common symptoms of COVID-19 now include [nasal congestion](#), [sore throat](#) and coughing, with some people getting headaches and fevers, Pinsky said. And though severe cases are rarer than they used to be, people who catch COVID-19 might still feel pretty sick, even if they had mild cases previously, Murphy said.

"Mild in the past doesn't equal mild this time," Murphy said.

The latest CDC guidance for people who get sick with any respiratory virus, including COVID-19, is to stay home and away from others until they've been fever free for 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing medications, and until they've seen their overall symptoms improve over 24 hours. The CDC then recommends people take other precautions to prevent spreading the illness, such as masking for five days, following a return to normal activities.

Antiviral medications, such as Paxlovid, can be used to treat COVID-19. Paxlovid is recommended for people at higher risk of developing severe illness.

Doctors also recommend people stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccines, which can reduce the risk of severe illness. Across Chicago, about 16.5% of people were up to date on COVID-19 vaccines as of July 20, according to the Chicago Department of Public Health.

"There are things you can do to help yourself," Murphy said.

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