

# U.S. COVID hospitalizations reach record high as California hospitals run out of oxygen

6 January 2021, by Ernie Mundell and Robin Foster



A record-breaking 131,000 coronavirus hospitalizations were recorded in the United States on Tuesday. In hard-hit Los Angeles County, hospitals began running out of oxygen and paramedics were told not to bring patients to a hospital if they showed little hope of survival.

"We're no longer a wave or surge, or surge upon a surge. We really are in the middle of a viral tsunami," Robert Kim-Farley, a medical epidemiologist at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health in Los Angeles, told the *Washington Post*.

In response, Gov. Gavin Newsom has announced a multi-pronged plan to replenish the state's oxygen supply that includes having the Army Corps of Engineers send crews to update oxygen-delivery systems at several aging hospitals—five in downtown Los Angeles and two in San Bernardino. Meanwhile, state emergency teams are refilling

oxygen tanks at 42 medical support units across the state and mobile oxygen systems and several hundred oxygen concentrator units have been ordered, the *Post* reported.

Things aren't much better in Arizona, which now has the nation's highest rate of [coronavirus](#) hospitalizations, the *Post* reported. Sixty-nine of every 100,000 residents are now hospitalized with the virus.

"Our state is doing very little to slow transmission of the virus. We have a very lax policy environment. Our businesses are open," Joe Gerald, a University of Arizona researcher who has been tracking the spread of the virus, told the *Post*. "The virus is just basically transmitting almost uninhibited through our population."

The optimism that came with new coronavirus vaccines is being tempered by the fact that the United States has reached the most dangerous stage of the pandemic so far, with the deadly results of December holiday gatherings yet to arrive, the newspaper said.

The U.S. vaccine rollout is also off to a stumbling start, with only 4.5 million Americans having received the first dose of a two-shot regimen. That number falls far short of the 20 million promised by the Trump administration by the end of 2020, although the first round of second doses of coronavirus vaccines did begin on Tuesday, *The New York Times* reported.

"We have so many crises happening simultaneously on multiple fronts," said Saskia Popescu, an epidemiologist with George Mason University in Virginia. "And all signs point to things getting a whole lot worse before they get better."

New daily deaths and cases have increased by more than 20 percent over the past week. States with the largest shares of their populations hospitalized are largely concentrated in the South and West: Arizona, Nevada, Alabama, California, Georgia, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Texas and Delaware, the *Post* reported.

### **New coronavirus variant now spotted in 5 U.S. States**

Just how dire things might get in the United States may depend on how widely a new, more contagious variant of the coronavirus is circulating in this country. The variant, which is not more deadly than its predecessor, has been reported in five states including Georgia, which reported its first case on Tuesday.

Almost every major hospital in the Atlanta area is now full, prompting state officials to reopen a field hospital at the World Congress Center, one of the nation's largest convention centers, the *Post* reported. Northeast Georgia Health System says its four hospitals are setting up cots in gyms, creating temporary spaces in hallways and, in some cases, treating patients while they are still inside an ambulance.

"We are holding our breath and waiting to see what the next two or three weeks might bring post-holiday, and hopefully we don't see a massive spike," said Sean Couch, a spokesman for the system.

Experts believe the new variant is probably already spreading elsewhere in the United States.

"The virus is becoming more fit, and we're like a deer in the headlights," Dr. Eric Topol, head of Scripps Research Translational Institute, told the *Associated Press*.

Topol said that the United States does less genetic sequencing of virus to discover variants than other nations, and thus was probably slow to detect this new mutation.

Other states are analyzing suspicious virus samples for the variant, Dr. Greg Armstrong, who

directs genetic sequencing at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told the *AP*.

No evidence has been found that this variant is more deadly or causes more severe illness, and scientists are saying that the vaccines will be effective against it. But a faster-spreading virus could swamp hospitals with seriously ill patients.

Researchers estimate the variant is 50% to 70% more contagious, Dr. Eric France, Colorado's chief medical officer, told the *AP*.

"Instead of only making two or three other people sick, you might actually spread it to four or five people," France said. "That means we'll have more cases in our communities. Those number of cases will rise quickly and, of course, with more cases come more hospitalizations."

The rapid spread of the new variant within Britain has triggered a third national lockdown there, with many countries banning or restricting flights from the United Kingdom.

### **A global scourge**

By Wednesday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 21.1 million while the death toll passed 357,300, according to a *Times* tally. On Wednesday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with over 2.5 million cases; Texas with more than 1.8 million cases; Florida with nearly 1.4 million cases; New York with over 1 million cases; and Illinois with more than 994,500 cases.

Curbing the spread of the coronavirus in the rest of the world remains challenging.

In India, the coronavirus case count was over 10.3 million on Wednesday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had over 7.8 million cases and more than 197,700 deaths as of Wednesday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 86.5 million on Wednesday, with nearly 1.9 million deaths recorded, according to the Hopkins tally.

**More information:** The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the new [coronavirus](#).

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