

COVID-19 cases rapidly surge in Texas

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A dramatic surge in the number of coronavirus cases in Texas is straining local hospitals to the breaking point. Over the past 12 days, the average number of cases and hospitalizations in the state reached record highs. Last weekend, the number of new daily cases surpassed 4,000 for the first time. On Tuesday, Texas confirmed over 5,000 cases for the first time.

Along with the sheer quantity of cases is the rise in the number of cases so severe that they require hospitalization. According to state officials, at least 4,092 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 across the state by Tuesday afternoon. It marked the 12th straight day of rising hospitalization rates and the first time Texas hospitals held more than 4,000 coronavirus patients.

On the same day, the number of new confirmed cases reached 5,489. Texas has experienced an exponential rise in cases over the past two weeks. June 10 was the first time the state reported more than 2,000 new cases in a day. A week later, on June 17, there were more than 3,000 new cases. On June 20, Texas recorded more than 4,000 cases for the first time.

The number of COVID-19 patients hospitalized in the state has more than doubled since the beginning of the month. North Texas currently has at least 1,074 people hospitalized in the region. Tarrant County saw a 20 percent increase in patients, rising from 268 people to 318. Dallas County reported 470 patients. A third spike occurred in Amarillo, which experienced an outbreak at a meatpacking plant, filling ICU capacity in less than five days.

Houston's Texas Medical Center, the largest such facility in the world, has reached 97 percent of its normal ICU bed capacity. The medical center can create an additional 1,000 ICU beds if it implements emergency measures, but experts worry that hospitals throughout the Houston area will be overwhelmed soon.

On Monday, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner reported 1,789 new COVID-19 cases, bringing the city's total to 14,322. If current trends continue, experts worry that Houston, the country's fourth largest city, will become an epicenter on the scale of New York City, which had seen 213,000 cases, of whom more than 30,000 died.

Dr. Peter Hotez, Dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, said that Houston could become the worst impacted city in the US. The number of COVID-19-positive hospital patients in Harris County, which includes Houston, has nearly tripled since the end of May. "We are potentially facing a very serious public health threat," he told local news outlet ABC 13 News.

The Texas Medical Center anticipates its ICU capacity could be exhausted in two weeks. Houston's Texas Children's Hospital, the largest pediatric hospital in the US, announced that it would admit adult patients across its campuses to alleviate pressure on other Houston hospitals.

"What we had before was a ripple compared to what we're about to experience," Dr. David Persse, health authority for the Houston Health Department, told the *Texas Tribune*.

The number of ICU patients exceeded bed capacity at Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital, and some had to be temporarily moved to other hospitals. According to a Harris Health System spokesperson, 76 percent of ICU beds were full as of Monday. City officials have suggested local convention centers and stadiums could be used as temporary overflow facilities.

The uptick in cases comes weeks after Governor Greg Abbott relaxed social distancing measures and allowed businesses to reopen in May. Texas was one of the first states to reopen after the Trump administration pushed its back-to-work campaign.

In the past, Abbott insisted Texas had the capacity to

contain any new outbreaks but then was forced to implement new health and safety measures. But on Tuesday he held a press conference at which he urged the state's residents to stay home, avoid going out unnecessarily, and follow public health protocols. He had lifted state restrictions by allowing cities to restrict public gatherings of more than 100 people.

Amid the spike in cases, the Trump administration is ending support for 13 coronavirus testing sites across the country, including seven in Texas. Local officials and medical experts are asking for funding for the sites to be extended, warning of "catastrophic cascading consequences." Four of the testing sites are in Houston and Harris County. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, two of these sites conduct more than 500 tests per day and make up the backbone of the city's testing capacity.



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