

# With nearly a half-million COVID cases daily, WHO warns world is at a critical juncture

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The fall and winter surge of COVID-19 cases, as predicted, has begun. The number of cases across North America and Europe is rising exponentially in some regions.

There have been more than 42.4 million cases of COVID-19 globally, with 1.14 million deaths thus far. On Friday, the number of daily new cases neared the 500,000 mark. Global deaths have consistently tracked above 6,000 four days running.

At the World Health Organization Friday press briefing on the COVID-19 pandemic, Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus ominously warned, “We are at a critical juncture in this pandemic. Particularly in the Northern Hemisphere. The next few months will be very tough and some countries are on a dangerous track. Too many countries are seeing an exponential increase in cases and that is now leading to hospitals and ICUs close to or above capacity, and we are still only in October. We urge leaders to take immediate action to prevent further unnecessary deaths, essential health services from collapsing and schools shutting again. As I said it in February and I am repeating it today, ‘This is not a drill.’” He strongly urged that world leaders could still “turn this around.”

During the question and answer session, epidemiologist Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove noted that many regions might reach their limits in ICU capacity in the next few weeks across Europe and North America. In what amounted to a plea, she cautioned that countries need to take “an honest assessment” of the situation immediately, utilizing all the data available to make “course corrections and necessary changes” to achieve the goals of reducing transmission and saving lives.

Dr. Mike Ryan reinforced these warnings: “We don’t have to see deaths track back to the horrific levels they were as a proportion of all cases as in the springtime. Things have changed, we are better, we are better now. We must prevent transmission. But we also need to focus on reducing the toll, which will rise in the coming days, I have no doubt. But we need to also put more investment in ensuring that our frontline system does not collapse in the face of an ever-

increasing caseload of sick patients.”

On Thursday, the United States reported 74,301 new cases. This was the fourth-highest total ever and the highest since July 24 when the number of daily cases peaked at 79,000. The seven-day moving average death rate has also edged upwards over 800. More problematic has been the rapid rise in hospitalized patients, which exceeded 41,000 across the country, a 33 percent increase in the last three weeks.

In their most recent projections for the US, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), based at the University of Washington, stated that the situation would intensify in November and December before peaking in January. With current facemask usage at under 50 percent and state governments continuing to remove social distancing mandates, this will lead to nearly 500,000 preventable deaths by February 1, IHME said.

Across the Sunbelt states, case counts and deaths are climbing again. Southern and Midwestern states—Kentucky, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wisconsin and Wyoming—have reported record high hospitalizations. Twelve states have seen the highest seven-day average of new cases, while six—Colorado, Indiana, Montana, Ohio, Oklahoma and Utah—have hit their highest case counts to date.

According to a Coronavirus Task Force report suppressed by the White House and leaked to CNN, small household gatherings are driving the rise in cases. With the holiday seasons fast approaching, Centers for Disease Control Director Dr. Robert Redfield, speaking at a call of the nation’s governors, said, “We think it’s imperative to stress the vigilance of these continued mitigation steps in the household setting.”

Almost every local health department across the country—from Vermont to New Mexico—has been sounding the alarm. A lockdown is in effect at the Oglala Sioux Tribe’s reservation in South Dakota, where 391 active COVID-19 cases have been reported among 20,000 residents. Hospitals in northern Idaho are running out of space for patients and officials have planned to airlift them

to Oregon or Washington. Florida public health officials have called for the public to stop holding birthday parties for children. Texas Governor Greg Abbott is redirecting El Paso resources as 3,750 new infections have afflicted the region this week, including 1,161 cases just on Thursday.

After a summer of much boasting and misplaced pride, Europe has surged past North America as the new epicenter of the global pandemic. The number of new COVID-19 cases is tenfold higher, with over 218,000 infections on Thursday accounting for 45 percent of all new cases worldwide.

Despite ample warnings that if nations did not build up their testing and contact tracing capacities, create programs to treat and care for quarantined cases adequately and make hospitals ready with appropriate material interventions and redundant staffing, the situation could quickly deteriorate to one in which lockdowns need to be imposed to bring the pandemic under control. Yet, despite ongoing counseling and warning, nations eager to get their economies back on firm footing quickly declared victory and let loose.

France reported over 42,000 cases yesterday, with almost 300 deaths. Along with Russia and Spain, it is distinguished as a nation with more than 1 million cases of COVID-19. Estimates indicate that by November daily cases will double their current levels. Though a curfew has been placed into effect from 9 p.m. until 6 a.m. for 46 million of France's 67 million people, businesses and schools remain open. The latest count indicates 2,139 COVID-19 patients on ventilators, which account for one-third of the country's capacity.

The United Kingdom has seen new cases exceed 20,000 for four consecutive days. Wales imposed a national shutdown on Friday, with stay-at-home orders for the population and all nonessential businesses, including pubs, to be shut. North Ireland is closing schools for two weeks with a review on November 2. Restaurants and cafes will operate on a limited basis for the next four weeks. Londoners are facing new restrictions again.

Nottingham University Hospital Trust told the BBC that "a full ward of people" with COVID-19 was being admitted each day. According to their patient census tracking, the Queen's Medical Centre and City Hospital are averaging 14 admissions with seven people on mechanical ventilation per day.

The Czech Republic has been the hardest hit in the initial throes of the second wave. The rise in cases is proceeding at an exponential rate, with new cases reaching 15,000 per day and deaths exceeding 100. Prime Minister Andrej Babis addressed the nation from Prague on Wednesday, saying, "We certainly made mistakes when we thought at the end of May, when we finished the reopening, that we had managed

it."

Poland saw 13,632 cases and 153 deaths Friday. The government is converting the National Stadium in Warsaw into a temporary field hospital to manage patients. The near 60,000 capacity stadium will make room for more than 500 patients to be equipped with oxygen therapy, according to Piotr Muller, a government spokesperson. Medical oxygen, an essential intervention in treating COVID patients, is once again in critical shortage.

Spain and Italy reported almost 20,000 new cases yesterday. Germany had 13,476 cases; Belgium reported 16,746. The Netherlands had nearly 10,000 cases. Europe accounts for almost one-third of all coronavirus deaths. In the face of this massive surge of infections, the controversial Swedish state epidemiologist, Dr. Anders Tegnell, told BBC Radio 4's "Today" program, "Basically, we mean that we will send a message to elderly people, you don't need to isolate any more completely."

These developments are a product of abject political failures that have placed the needs of financial markets above life. Adam Kamradt-Scott, a global health professor at the University of Sydney, told Vox, "It was understandable that countries imposed lockdowns in the initial weeks when countries first got hit and were quickly overwhelmed. But six months on, countries should have sufficient systems in place to undertake the necessary contact tracing and have a range of other measures they can use to limit the spread of the virus, rather than looking to hard lockdowns as the answer."

Damiano Sandri, an IMF analyst who has been studying the impact of the virus on economic activity, noted that economic "damage is also done if you get a strong wave of infections and people start dying."



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