

Missouri records highest rate of new COVID-19 infections in US

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US health experts warn that the Delta variant of the coronavirus is driving up new infections and deaths nationwide, particularly in states with below-average vaccination rates. The increased COVID-19 rate is attributed to the Delta variant initially discovered in India, also known by the alpha-numerical designation B.1.617.2.

President Joe Biden's original target of 70 percent vaccination of US adults by July 4 will not be met, as the vaccination campaign has come to a near halt. As of June 27, only 46 percent of the US population had been fully vaccinated, and 54 percent had received at least one dose. The seven-day average of vaccinations nationally had declined to 715,000 per day.

The low national vaccination rate, coupled with the insistence of federal and state authorities that everything reopen without restrictions, is causing efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 to start to unravel. Cases are rising primarily in the states with the lowest vaccination levels.

Since most of the world's population will not receive vaccines due to lack of supply, new virus strains will inevitably evolve. There is a possibility that in time a variant will emerge that renders the current vaccines essentially ineffective and ends the progress made in the United States towards lowering cases and deaths. Already the decline in the number of new cases of COVID-19 across the country has plateaued at just above 12,000 infections per day.

Missouri was recently declared to have the nation's highest rate of new COVID-19 cases. Only 38 percent of Missouri's population is fully vaccinated.

During the week of June 19 to 26, the state saw 5,428 new infections. The Delta strain of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is particularly entrenched in southwestern Missouri. Webster County Health Unit Administrator Scott Allen told the local media, "That variant is dominant in 96 percent in our sewer shed."

Testing of wastewater (also referred to as sewage) from households and buildings for RNA from SARS-CoV-2 virus helps public health officials in tracking the extent of infections across a community. In a story published by the *Columbia Daily Tribune*, Marc Johnson, professor of molecular biology and immunology at the University of Missouri School of Medicine, said, "The Delta variant started in Branson," a city in far southwestern Missouri. "From there, it spread to the rural areas of the state." The variant reportedly penetrated the entire state within three weeks.

Dr. Dennis Robinson of the Marshfield Family Clinic confirmed to KY3, "It's six times as bad as far as being able to spread." He said that patients present more severe symptoms when they contract the Delta variant.

"When one person gets it, it spreads to more people. It seems to affect them a little differently, more with GI complaints. They feel worse than they did with the original COVID. They stay sicker longer. I've had several patients run a fever seven or eight days."

Local trauma physician Dr. Sam Alexander said, "I'm seeing them back in the emergency department months later. They're having all kinds of complications and problems related to the disease."

In the extreme northwest of the state, the Atchison County Health Department warned on its Facebook page that though as of June 21 no local cases were reported, there was a spike in COVID-19 cases in the immediate region. The department expected the peak in infections to reach Atchison County within the next several weeks. As a result, the county set up a pop-up vaccination clinic, and the vaccines are regularly available at the department.

The northern and southwestern counties are mainly responsible for the spike. In the state's northwest, Livingston County went from 240 cases per 100,000 people in January to 280 in May. In the county's largest city, Chillicothe (population 9,700), dozens of people

have been admitted to Hendrick Medical Center since the fall.

Steve Schieber reported to Kansas City's KCTV 5: "We had a sudden increase in cases significantly, particularly in Livingston County. That had a dramatic effect on the community." Livingston County Health Department said its surge peaked after Memorial Day, but is slowing now as local vaccination rates have increased. As of June 22, 31.5 percent of Livingston County residents were fully vaccinated. Most northern and southern Missouri counties have vaccination rates below 40 percent, with a few southern counties having rates below 20 percent.

Hospitalization rates for southern Missouri rose 72 percent, from 154 on June 1 to 265 on June 18. Statewide hospitalization rates for the same period increased by 11 percent, to 747. In Missouri's third-largest city, Springfield, area hospitals are overloaded and are on the cusp of sending patients to other cities.

In an article written by Sam Clancy of the Associated Press, Springfield-Greene County Health Department Assistant Director Katie Towns reported: "It has come to that. There will probably be more people that are sent to alternative cities because we're in the middle of the surge, and I'm not sure when it will end."

In the state's center, Boone County has the highest vaccination rate of 44 percent, while south-central Pulaski County has the lowest at 11 percent. The largest metro area, St. Louis, has managed to keep daily hospitalization rates below 100 people, but there are worries that the surge in southern Missouri will increase cases there.

The CEO of CoxHealth, Steve Edwards, warned, "We think that with the Delta variant here, those that aren't vaccinated are just sitting ducks." CoxHealth operates several hospitals in southern Missouri.

The average patient age in the region is dropping. ABC News ran a story in which Leanne Handle, who works at CoxHealth in Springfield as an assistant nurse manager for a COVID-19 unit, sounded the alarm that young, unvaccinated people were being admitted severely ill.

"Right now," she said, "our average patient population is anywhere from 30 to 55. We have seen patients as young as 18." She explained that these patients don't expect to have to make medical decisions such as whether to be intubated or whether to have a "Do Not Resuscitate" order in place if their condition is dire.

Handle went on, "We have very few patients who have been admitted that have been vaccinated. So, it has been proven to keep you at least out of the hospital and from

severe disease."

On June 22, Mercy Springfield hospital reported one admitted infant that tested positive.

Despite these concerning developments, the Missouri state government has made it clear that the health of the state's population is not the primary consideration. On June 23, Cole County Circuit Judge Jon Beetem struck down a citizen-led ballot initiative to provide access to Medicaid, the federal program for low-income people needing health insurance, for an additional 275,000 residents.

The judge claimed that the ballot initiative, passed by the public in August 2020, was unconstitutional because the wording of the ballot didn't include a way to pay for it. The parties that put the ballot initiative to the public for a vote will appeal Judge Beetem's decision, and it is expected that the case will go to the Missouri Supreme Court.

The ballot initiators will argue that the state's refusal to fund the expansion does not abrogate its responsibility to do so. If the bid to expand Missouri Medicaid fails, rural hospitals risk closure. They need the funding that the expansion would provide due to rural residents steadily moving to the larger cities. Residents would have started signing up for the program on July 1, but the ruling has put that on hold.

As Governor Mike Parson encourages the full reopening of schools and businesses, he is threatening to cut hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for state health programs beginning July 1. As with the federal government, state governments will willfully sacrifice the lives of their constituents to keep schools and businesses open.



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