

Florida sees explosive growth of Delta variant infections, hospitalizations

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Florida is experiencing an alarming spike in COVID-19 infections and hospital patients, fueled by the deadly Delta variant of the coronavirus, the latest mutation of the disease which is accelerating a tremendous resurgence of the pandemic worldwide.

The state has emerged as a significant epicenter for the new surge in cases engendered by the more lethal variant, with health authorities around the nation warning that the latest wave of sickness will lead to record-breaking case numbers and death rates like those reached during earlier peaks in the pandemic.

This is already being witnessed in Florida, where the number of confirmed cases and hospitalizations are increasingly rivaling the historic highs seen in the summer of 2020.

Although Florida comprises just 6.5 percent of the U.S. population, it accounts for 20.4 percent of the country's new cases, based on the data the state is reporting to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

On Wednesday Florida recorded its fourth-highest single-day spike in COVID-19 cases since the pandemic began, with 17,589 new cases. This was the eighth consecutive day Florida reported to the CDC more than 12,000 new daily infections, with cases skyrocketing in a single month. Just one month earlier, on June 28, the state reported only 1,312 new COVID-19 cases, so Wednesday's number represents a month-to-month increase of 1,241 percent. The daily spike in cases was the largest since January 15.

The three-highest days of new COVID-19 cases for Florida all occurred during Florida's peak in January, with 17,783 cases on January 6, 19,816 cases on January 7, and 19,530 cases on January 8.

CDC officials also reported 92 new COVID-19 deaths in Florida on Wednesday, which brings the total during the pandemic to 38,340. Moreover, a new CDC guidance demanded that fully vaccinated Floridians should wear masks in indoor spaces, as the entire state of Florida is considered a high transmission area. The new guidelines on mask wearing included other states seeing "substantial and

high transmission" rates.

Of Florida's 67 counties, 64 are considered areas of high transmission by the CDC. The rampant spread of the pandemic is also finding expression in an uptick in positivity rates, with Florida's seven-day average positivity rate climbing to 17.2 percent on Monday, up from 16.8 percent on Sunday.

According to public health experts, the highest caseloads and severe infections are being driven by unvaccinated individuals who are still vulnerable to the virus. The level of vaccinations still remains far below what's needed to slow down spread of the deadly variant. More than 12 million Floridians have received at least one dose of the vaccine, about 57.2 percent of the state's total population. An estimated 49 percent of Florida's total population is fully vaccinated, in line with the US average.

Although the media and sections of the Democratic party have sought to scapegoat the population for not taking vaccines, the low vaccination rates are primarily due to the propaganda emanating from layers of the far-right political establishment that have promoted anti-scientific conspiracy theories to discredit mass vaccinations.

The Biden administration has made as its top priority the reopening of in-person schooling and opposition to lockdowns no matter the costs to human life, in an effort to normalize living with COVID-19. Following Biden's suggestions that the pandemic was virtually done away with, the CDC moved in May to end its regulations on mask mandates and social distancing, only to have such policies reversed this month because of the explosive growth of the Delta variant.

As a result of the new CDC guidelines, major businesses, local governments and schools throughout Florida have been forced to revive mask mandates to counter the spike in cases. On Wednesday, Walt Disney World announced that starting Friday all guests, unvaccinated or not, would have to wear masks while in indoor spaces and on Disney transportation. This came after Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings reinstated a state of emergency in the county due to high

rates of COVID-19 transmission.

The school board for Broward County Public Schools, the second largest in the state, voted unanimously on Wednesday to institute a mask mandate for all students, teachers and staff when school begins on August 18. In Miami-Dade County, Mayor Daniella Levine Cava mandated masks at all county facilities on Wednesday, including libraries and recreational centers. Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach has also moved to reverse policies starting Friday, saying it will not allow visitors at its medical center or physician locations, while having limited visitation at its emergency centers in Miami Beach, Aventura and Hialeah.

The enormous surge in cases is propelling a tsunami of hospitalizations. Hospital admissions of coronavirus patients are now surpassing previous peaks reached during last summer's surge. The state's Health and Human Services department released data on Monday confirming that hospitals in Jacksonville were at maximum capacity.

Ascension St. Vincent's on the city's Southside has dropped to negative for ICU beds available to patients. Jacksonville's Orange Park Medical Center reportedly has a zero percent availability for ICU beds. Florida hospitals as a whole reported more than 8,900 patients with COVID-19 on Thursday. The Florida Hospital Association said the state peaked at 10,179 patients last July. The number of patients on Thursday was five times higher than a month ago, and it climbed from about 5,500 in just one week.

As Jacksonville emerges as the epicenter for the pandemic's resurgence in Florida, local health experts are sounding the alarm bells for the impact the much more contagious new variant is having on children as the school year approaches. Dr. Mobeen Rathore, the chief of pediatric infectious disease and immunology for Wolfson Children's Hospital, called the vaccination rates among children "pathetically low." The Florida Department of Health's most recent COVID-19 data shows only 35 percent of young people ages 12 to 19 are vaccinated in the state, the lowest of any age group.

Despite the extraordinary danger facing the population because of the rise of the Delta variant, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has redoubled his opposition to any scientifically guided health measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19. At an event in Salt Lake City, Utah, the right-wing governor condemned the mask requirements being issued in various counties and vowed to introduce a legislative order allowing parents and guardians to choose whether their children should wear masks in classrooms.

DeSantis' declaration came as a response to Broward's school board announcing its new mask mandate for schools this fall and in defiance of the CDC's recently released

guidelines on masking. The governor said that forcing children to wear masks in schools "would be a huge mistake." He said that an emergency action curtailing mask mandates would be signed into law "very soon" in order to counter the "push from the CDC and others to make every single person, kids and staff have to wear masks all day."

The governor's decision to implement an executive order prohibiting masking in schools has received some backlash from Democrats and the teacher's unions. Florida Education Association President Andrew Spar denounced the Governor for the draconian measures because he "continues to think that Tallahassee knows best what all Floridians need." Likewise, Miami-Dade County Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said Friday the school district would seek COVID-19 recommendations from local health experts "regardless" of any executive order issued from DeSantis.

No confidence should be placed in either the Democratic Party nor the trade union bureaucracies, both of whom carried out the reckless reopening of non-essential businesses and schools that was demanded by DeSantis earlier in the pandemic, which has prepared the groundwork for the current wave of infections. The Democrats as well as the teachers unions subordinated all health policies regarding school closures throughout the past year to profit interests, which demanded that children be placed in unsafe classrooms so that parents could return to work and pump out wealth for big business.

Spar's comments reflected this, as he limited himself to a feckless plea asking DeSantis to listen to elected officials in the cities and school districts and allowing them to make "health and safety decisions locally," a request that will surely go ignored as the Republicans push to overrule all public health restrictions aimed at COVID-19.



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