

Record hospitalizations in Florida as coronavirus Delta variant continues to surge

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Florida reported Tuesday 11,515 hospitalizations caused by COVID-19, up from just 1,000 in mid-June and another indication of the virulent spread of the coronavirus Delta variant in the state, nationally and internationally. This marked the third day straight that the current number of patients hospitalized has exceeded the previous record of 10,170 set in July 2020.

The Florida Hospital Association reports that of those hospitalized, 2,400 are in ICU beds. Hospitals have also reported that emergency room patients have had to be put in hallways because there are not enough rooms in which to put patients. Medical workers have also noted that the average age of patients is dropping, pointing to the increased ability of the Delta variant to cause severe illness even among young and ostensibly healthier victims.

The surge in hospitalizations follows the sharp rise of daily new cases in Florida, which have now reached a seven-day average over 17,000, more than 1,000 higher than the state's previous peak in January. In response, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis reiterated his pledge to reject implementing any policies to contain the virus such as mask mandates or the closure of non-essential businesses. At the same time Governor DeSantis celebrated his executive order banning mask mandates issued by schools, threatening to withhold funding from schools that attempt even minimal measures to protect the lives of their students, staff and parents.

While Florida has become the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, it is a window into the future for the rest of the country as the Delta variant continues to spread uncontrolled. The US as a whole is currently reporting an average of nearly 87,000 cases each day, more than double the number of cases

reported just two weeks ago. This is higher than last summer's peak and the rate of the spread matches the explosive increase in cases last October that led to a murderous peak in cases last December and January, a time when more than 3,000 people a day were dying from the virus.

The dangers are further underscored by the sharp rise in hospitalizations elsewhere in the US, particularly in the South and parts of the Southwest. In cities such as New Orleans and the surrounding areas, there are 20 or more COVID-19 hospitalizations per 100 available beds. Louisiana as a whole is second only to Florida in statewide coronavirus hospitalizations, with 15 out of every 100 beds occupied by pandemic patients.

Other states are suffering similar disasters. Between 10 to 15 percent of hospital admissions in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Nevada and Oklahoma are coronavirus related. Sharp rises in hospital admissions over the past week have also been seen in California, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas. The United States as a whole has had 43,583 COVID-19 hospital admissions in the past seven days, an increase of nearly 33 percent over the previous week.

The situation is particularly dire in areas such as North Texas, where hospitalizations have quadrupled in the past month to 1,700. State officials have, however, denied hospitals' requests for emergency staff to help deal with the surge, demanding that local resources be redirected from other social programs to fight the pandemic.

Despite the surge in cases and hospitalizations nationwide, there have been no public safety measures mandated by the Biden administration. Instead, Biden denounced Republican governors such as DeSantis and Texas' Greg Abbott on Tuesday for not imposing their own mandates, declaring, "Florida and Texas account

for one-third of all new COVID-19 cases in the entire country. ... If you aren't going to help, please get out of the way."

He did not, however, announce a national mask mandate or any other measures in the face of the growing surge. At best, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has announced that masks are merely recommended in "public, indoor settings" where the spread of the virus is "substantial" or "high," despite the fact that such high rates of the coronavirus last year prompted limited lockdowns and actual mandates.

Moreover, Biden and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, along with the heads of the teachers unions, have insisted that in-person schooling must go forward full steam this fall. While some school districts have issued their own mask mandates, there has been no suggestion that schools close and move to online learning, despite the fact that open schools have been shown to spur on community transmission of the virus, and that the Delta variant attacks younger age groups more virulently than previous variants.

Biden has justified his inaction by asserting that the real solution to the pandemic is vaccines, with the media echoing the claim and focusing on the fact that 70 percent of US adults are at least partially vaccinated, a target missed by a month. In a press conference Tuesday, Biden's main focus was that the United States has sent 100 million vaccine doses overseas, part of its pledge to distribute 500 million doses internationally.

In reality, these are at best token amounts. The most effective vaccines are the two-dose mRNA types, meaning that at most the Biden administration has provided enough vaccines to fully vaccinate 50 million people, about the population of Uganda or South Korea. In contrast, the World Health Organization has called for 70 percent of the world's population to be fully vaccinated by the end of the year, which requires about 11 billion doses. Four billion have so far been administered, and the majority of those have been used in the wealthier Western nations. On the other hand, less than one percent of the population has been even partially vaccinated across sub-Saharan Africa.

Vaccines are also not the panacea that Biden and other heads of state would have the world's working class believe. Bloomberg has cataloged over 100,000

"breakthrough" cases of the Delta variant in the United States alone, where people have become infected despite having the vaccine. While those who contracted the virus while vaccinated rarely get severely ill, they have been shown to act as a vector of transmission of the virus for those who are unvaccinated and more vulnerable to the virus.

Moreover, the virus itself is evolving to resist the vaccine, a product of the hundreds of millions of cases internationally, a significant percentage among those partially or fully vaccinated. Among the most worrying developments is that the Lambda variant, first identified in Peru, is more resistant than the Delta variant to vaccine-induced immunity. A preprint study published last week by researchers at the University of Tokyo shows that the Lambda variant has three specific mutations that help it evade antibodies.

So far there are just over 1,000 confirmed cases of the Lambda variant in the US, and cases have been detected in 28 other countries. The potential for this variant to evade immunity, however, raises the still colossal dangers of the pandemic. The more the virus is allowed to spread, the more it mutates and will all but inevitably become immune to the vaccine. Such dangers make it imperative that other public health measures such as testing, contact tracing, social distancing and the closure of non-essential businesses are combined with mass vaccination campaigns as the only way to stop even more unnecessary deaths.



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