

# As more infectious variants spread in Germany, rising number of COVID patients experience severe illness

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As the number of severe COVID-19 cases rises and more infectious variants spread, politicians across party lines are showing their willingness to accept a new winter of death in the pandemic.

As of last week, between 700,000 and 1.6 million people in Germany were symptomatically infected with the virus. Although the autumn vacations, which are currently underway in many states, appear to have reduced the incidence of infection, the 7-day rate is still 464.1 infections per hundred thousand members of the population. However, due to the abolition of compulsory testing and infrastructure, official figures have long since inadequately reflected the actual incidence of infection.

This is evident from the continuing rise in the number of outbreaks in hospitals and nursing homes. In medical treatment facilities, there were 274 outbreaks last week, 126 more than the previous week. In addition, 38 people died from past outbreaks. In nursing homes and homes for the elderly, the number of outbreaks increased from 567 the previous week to 687 last week, when 99 people died from previous outbreaks.

The seriousness of the situation is particularly evident in hospitals. The number of hospitalizations has been rising for weeks and, when adjusted, is 20 per 100,000, or about 16,000 hospitalizations per week. It has thus tripled within one month. 1,723 people need intensive care treatment.

Two weeks ago, the chairman of the German Hospital Association (DKG) Gerald Gaß told the *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland* (RND): "We have significant increases in Covid positive patients. Compared to the previous week, occupancy has risen by 50 percent. ... With around 19,000 positively tested

patients, we are currently as high as at the peak times of the summer wave. ... We are heading for extremely difficult weeks across the board and not just in southern Germany."

Christian Karagiannidis, head of the DIVI intensive care registry, also warned, "In some regions of Bavaria, Hesse and in several cities in North Rhine-Westphalia, we already have hotspots where there are hardly any free intensive care beds left because staff are often symptomatic and also absent for longer periods."

Since then, hospitalization rates have risen steadily, bringing many hospitals to the brink of overcrowding. "The emergency centres are overcrowded, patients are piling up in the corridors," complained the works council of the municipal Munich Clinic, for example. At Caritas Hospital in Bad Mergentheim, the medical director said more coronavirus patients were currently being treated than at any time in the last two years. Those experiencing severe illness as a result were also on the rise.

Hospitals are also burdened by a high number of staff absences, due to staff infections. For example, Detlef Troppens, chairman of the Brandenburg State Hospital Association (LKB), warned Monday, "We have 10 to 15 percent ward closures." There are already restrictions in the treatment of patients.

Rising energy costs as a result of the war against Russia are also bringing numerous hospitals to the brink of collapse. "The financial situation continues to come to a head drastically and is assuming proportions that threaten hospitals' existence," reported Björn Saeger, management spokesman at the municipal hospital in Brandenburg an der Havel. Also, Federal Minister of Health Karl Lauterbach (Social Democrat,

SPD) warned even that hospitals “face a completely drastic liquidity problem come in the next months.”

The increase in the number of those experiencing severe illness following infection with coronavirus has also resulted in a growing number of deaths. Since the beginning of the week, 895 people have already died—an average of 179 per day, which is more than twice as many as died at the same time a year ago and about five times as many as died at the same time two years ago.

The situation threatens to worsen in the autumn and winter with the spread of Omicron subvariants BQ.1 and BQ.1.1. Both exhibit high immune escape, so that even the recently recovered and fully vaccinated can become infected with the variant.

According to Robert Koch Institute data, the BQ.1 variant currently accounts for 2 percent of infections and the BQ.1.1 variant for just under 3 percent. However, the figures are about three weeks behind the curve and are thus already much higher.

According to calculations by the German Cancer Research Centre, the proportion is already 6 and 7 percent. According to news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Cambridge scientist and bioinformatician Cornelius Römer suspects that the proportion of BQ.1.1 is already 10 percent.

He expects “that BQ.1.1 will drive a wave of variants in Europe and North America before the end of November. Its relative share has more than doubled every week.” The current autumn wave would then be joined by another—driven by the other Omicron subvariants. The result would be a double wave.

Numerous scientists share this opinion: according to *Augsburger Allgemeine*, the German Charité vaccine researcher, Leif Sander suspects, “In the next few weeks, BQ.1.1 could become the most widespread variant and displace BA.5.”

Friedemann Weber, director of the Institute of Virology at Justus Liebig University in Giessen, told *Focus* magazine, BQ.1.1 is “the fastest-growing virus variant in Germany at the moment. While its share of cases is relatively small and BA.5 remains dominant, that may soon change, as the BQ1.1 curve is much steeper.”

However, politicians from all parties have made it clear that they will not do anything about the rising number of those experiencing severe outcomes, nor

about the spread of new variants. Despite the surge in recent weeks, no state government has introduced stronger infection control measures. On the contrary, numerous leading politicians openly proclaim their intention to accept the current conditions.

For example, Federal Family Minister Lisa Paus (Greens) warned against closing schools or children’s and youth facilities in the coming months. “Under no circumstances should day-care centres and schools, gyms and youth clubs be shut down this autumn and winter. Not because of coronavirus and also not because of energy savings.”

Brandenburg’s SPD state parliamentary group leader Daniel Keller rejected the call for an expansion of the mandatory mask-wearing requirement, saying, “The incidence rate in hospitals is in the red, but in terms of the occupancy of intensive care beds, we are not yet in the critical area,” He warned against “political actionism”: “We have a mandatory mask requirement where it is relevant.”

In his speech at the Christian Social Union (CSU) party conference, Bavarian state Prime Minister Markus Söder also ruled out any real measures to combat the pandemic: “We will no longer do cordoning off in winter. No way.” He added that COVID-19 in Germany was on its way to becoming endemic and that the state government would also set its sights on relaxing quarantine rules.

Last week, the Green Party-Christian Democrat state government in Baden-Württemberg even went so far as to overturn the mask-wearing requirement in nursing homes.



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