

# Infections, hospitalisations and fatalities rise as COVID-19 surges unhindered throughout Australia

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Australia is witnessing a major upsurge in the COVID-19 pandemic, fuelled by the emergence of infectious and vaccine-resistant Omicron subvariants and the dismantling by all governments of public health measures to stop the spread.

Health officials are clearly nervous about the surge of infections. While federal and state governments are refusing to re-implement safety measures, they have issued tepid recommendations for mask-wearing and social distancing.

Over the past week, more than 79,000 new infections were reported across the country, 31 percent higher than the November 11 figure. Weekly totals have increased in every state and the Australian Capital Territory. The sharpest rise was in Queensland, where infections soared 73 percent from 5,828 in the week ending November 11 to 10,106 this week.

In NSW and Victoria, where the surge began earlier, cases have doubled within a fortnight. The two states recorded a combined total of more than 48,267 new infections in the week ending Friday, up from 22,676 two weeks earlier.

The official case count, totalling more than 10.5 million infections, is acknowledged to be a vast undercount. Recent serological surveys suggested that 16.9 million people—two-thirds of the population—have already been infected at least once by COVID-19.

Hospitalisations have also risen sharply. Across the country, 2,145 COVID-19 patients are in hospital and 64 are in intensive care. The majority of these are in NSW, where emergency department presentations shot up to 248, from 169 last week. A total of 1,148 people in the state are hospitalised for the virus, the most since September 23. Hospitalisations in Victoria jumped 28.5 percent compared with a week ago, to a total of 352.

In the week ending Friday, 108 people died from COVID-19, up from 83 the previous week. A further 13 fatalities in Victoria were reported today, bringing the country's total to 15,980.

The systematic removal of all safety measures against the

pandemic, beginning last December, has resulted in more than 13,700 coronavirus deaths this year alone.

In Queensland, the state government changed its “COVID risk rating” to “amber,” recommending masks in some indoor settings and for the elderly. NSW Health also updated the rating to “amber” on Friday, “encouraging” the use of masks on public transport and requiring masks in public hospitals and health facilities along with limited visitor numbers.

NSW Health deputy secretary Deb Willcox said the decision was informed by a sudden wave of infection among health workers. “As of 16 November, there were 1,089 health care workers in isolation up from 645 the previous week,” she said.

Along with the fast-tracked removal of effective health measures, the Albanese Labor government's dismantling of testing, with reporting of positive rapid antigen tests no longer mandatory, has made the true degree of viral transmission difficult to determine.

In a statement acknowledging this, NSW Health wrote: “PCR testing rates have almost halved from what they were at the beginning of the Omicron BA.4/5 wave... [The] changes in Covid-19 testing and reporting means that notification numbers no longer reflect the level of community transmission.”

Independent pathology provider 4Cyte Pathology closed its drive-in PCR testing locations throughout Victoria on Wednesday due to “changes in government policies.” Of 169 COVID testing centres listed on the Victorian government's website, 77 were closed as of Friday.

The proportion of positive PCR tests in NSW jumped this week from 14 to 16 percent, a further indication of the rapid spread. Meanwhile, catchments of sewage tested in Victoria recorded a “strong” or “very strong” detection of COVID-19.

Despite the severe nature of the new wave, federal health officials are doubling down on the government's “let it rip”

policy, claiming that the worst of the pandemic is “over,” and that Australians must “live with the virus.”

Health Minister Mark Butler told Radio 3AW he hoped the wave would peak by Christmas. “The advice I’m getting is this is likely to follow the trajectory of Singapore... and their wave, in the words of the technical advisers we receive advice from, was ‘short and sharp’ and it’s come down very quickly.”

Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly, who described the possibility of mass infection with the arrival of Omicron just under a year ago as a “Christmas present,” reassured big business that lockdowns were “not likely,” no matter how high case numbers soared. “My advice at the moment is to be alert but not afraid, I think it would be a good way to look at it,” he said.

These statements are not based on a scientific assessment of the risks posed by deadly, contagious COVID-19 variants, but are a reflection of the pro-business character of the official response to the pandemic in Australia and worldwide.

In stark contrast to this rosy picture, a recent study by researchers from the University of Tasmania and Deakin University estimated that more than half a million Australians may have symptoms of Long COVID in early December, with 110,000 of them suffering “significant impacts” that would limit their activities.

Professor Martin Hensher, the study’s lead author, said: “It is likely that several tens of thousands of Australian adults will be unable to work in December due to Long COVID.” Hensher noted that Australia was an outlier among similar countries in not having instituted large-scale national surveys about Long COVID.

Doctors are calling on the government to increase data gathering, surveillance, and extra support to care for patients. Professor Karen Price, president of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, said on Thursday: “Patients are reporting problems navigating the health system to get proper Long COVID assessment, diagnosis, and appropriate treatment and that must change. There are not enough specialist Long COVID clinics, especially in rural and remote areas, and those clinics that are up and running can’t meet demand.”

Aged care facilities around the country are being hit by a new round of COVID outbreaks. There were 199 new outbreaks reported in residential homes over the past week, raising the current active total to 462. There were also 2,859 combined new resident and staff cases and 40 resident deaths.

The Australian ruling elite is nevertheless pressing ahead with a full economic reopening, accompanied by the evisceration of health measures. Woolworths Group,

Australia’s largest supermarket chain, announced this week the removal of its mandatory vaccination policy for staff. The grocery giant, which owns supermarket chain Woolworths and department store Big W, is now only “strongly encouraging” workers to get vaccinated.

Woolworths also announced plans to change several other COVID protocols, including the removal of plastic screens at self-service check-out counters and physical distancing stickers on the floor. These reminders are being removed, doubtless at significant cost to the company, because they are incompatible with ruling-class lies that the pandemic is over.

Woolworths, the country’s largest private employer with a 180,000-strong workforce, is among the first retailers to revoke the vaccine mandate. This is part of a broader attempt by the financial elite and its political representatives to make the pandemic a distant memory, even under conditions of mass infection, debilitation, and death. Other corporations are certain to follow this step.

The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees’ Association (SDA), the main union covering Woolworths employees, has not uttered a word of protest over these new developments. This is in line with the role of the trade unions throughout the pandemic.

Despite the growing opposition of healthcare workers, educators and other sections of workers to the intolerable conditions they face under a continuing pandemic, the unions have supported the lifting of restrictions and have consistently opposed lockdowns and other public health measures.

Workers must take up a fight against this corporate onslaught, fully supported by the union bureaucrats, to keep profits flowing at the expense of lives and public health. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and democratically run by workers themselves, must be formed in every workplace to protect workers’ interests and conditions.

*The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee and the Committee for Public Education are holding a joint online public meeting this Sunday, November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT), titled “Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!” Register now: <https://bit.ly/3CRCuOh>*



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