

Infections expected to rise as new version of omicron spreads

By GARY A. WARNER
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SALEM — An upswing in COVID-19 cases in Oregon is expected to hit sometime this week, driven by infections of the hyper-contagious BA.2 version of the omicron variant, according to a new state report.

The forecast from the Oregon Health & Science University shows a much lower peak for the new wave of cases, topping out at under 300 hospitalizations per day in the first week of May, then resuming a downward trend until reaching current levels again by late June.

“The primary forecast shows a slight increase in hospitalized patients as the impacts of BA.2 and reduced COVID restrictions are experienced,” said the report written by Dr. Peter Graven, the chief COVID-19 forecaster at OHSU.

The forecast is part of the mixed medical and political signals around the nation as the omicron surge that began in late November and peaked in mid-January has rapidly dropped to levels not seen since before the delta variant spike began at the end of June 2021.

As of Friday, March 25, the statistics in Oregon showed a precipitous drop-off. The Oregon Health Authority reported 189 new cases of COVID-19 and two deaths. Oregon hospi-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

A thin plastic sheet separates the intensive care unit from the COVID-19 ward at Grande Ronde Hospital on Monday, Aug. 30, 2021. Hospitalizations are expected to increase in the coming weeks with the spread of an omicron variant, state health authorities say.

tals reported March 25 that 157 patients with COVID-19, down four from the day before. There are 26 patients with COVID-19 in intensive care units, up one from March 24 report.

Positive test results — a key indicator of future growth of the virus — were at 2.5%, down from the high point of 22.6% in mid-January. The OHA has said throughout the pandemic

that a rate of 5% or under was manageable for health care providers.

The pandemic in Oregon reached two milestones over the past week, passing 7,000 deaths and 700,000 cases. As of Friday, there have been 7,035 deaths and 702,750 reported infections.

The expected rise in cases is due to two factors, one expected, but the other an unwelcome surprise.

Even before the official lifting of indoor face mask requirements, compliance with safeguards was waning. OHSU forecasters said a slowing of the drop in cases was likely as more people became exposed.

But the loosened restrictions also came as the BA.2 “subvariant” arrived in Oregon. Beginning this week, the OHA has started tracking BA.2 cases, which have

been small but rising. Analysis of wastewater around the state has shown traces of BA.2.

Last week, nearly all states were showing a rapid decline in cases. The BA.2 infections are seen as the main reason nine states are now showing a reversal in the trend.

BA.2 has spread rapidly in Asia and Europe. Twice as contagious as its already superspreading cousin BA.1, the BA.2 virus has caused a tsunami of new cases in China, which is reporting its highest infection rate of the 29-month pandemic, which began in Wuhan at the end of December 2019.

The World Health Organization reported 18 European countries are seeing a rise in new cases.

The WHO said that BA.2 was able to spread because of what it called premature removal of mask and other social distancing rules.

But the mixed messaging from medical and political sources continues. Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has announced the state of emergency that’s been in place since March 2020 will end April 1.

New York ended its vaccine mandate for athletes and performers. Los Angeles schools have ended masking. The U.S. Capitol will reopen for public tours next week. Hawaii was the last state to end indoor masking man-

dates earlier this month. The rate of people getting a first shot of vaccine has dropped off since early in the year.

While President Joe Biden continues to ask Congress for an increase in COVID-19 aid, the White House Easter Egg Roll is on for the first time since 2019.

All omicron variants so far have proven to be significantly more contagious than previous COVID-19 spikes, with the latest OHA statistics showing 61.9% of new infections were in unvaccinated people, while 37.7% were vaccine “breakthrough cases.” Of those, 52.7% were fully vaccinated and boosted.

Most federal, state and local political leaders across the country have said they won’t impose new restrictions unless a more virulent variant appears. In the United States, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are considering a request from vaccine-makers Pfizer and Moderna to approve a second booster shot for either the elderly or all adults. The shots have already been approved for immunocompromised people and some foreign nations, including Israel, are offering the fourth shot to the general public.

A federal advisory panel is meeting April 6 to discuss vaccination policy, but action could come earlier.

COVID-19 cases in Wallowa County see major drop in March

By RONALD BOND
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE The Oregon Health Authority has reported a new COVID-19-related death in Wallowa County, the first the agency has listed that occurred in 2022.

The death, originally reported March 11, was of a 98-year-old woman who died Jan 23, just 11 days after contracting the ill-

ness. She had underlying conditions, according to the OHA.

It’s the 15th death of a Wallowa County resident that is attributed or linked to COVID-19, though one of those has been disputed by the family.

COVID-19 cases have taken a sharp drop since the January omicron spike.

As of March 28, there have been 1,251 cases in two years of the pandemic

in Wallowa County. After more than 330 cases in January, the numbers have drastically decreased. There were 99 cases in February, and through the first 27 days of March, there have been just 19 cases.

The OHA on March 23 also reported one COVID-19 hospitalization in Region 9, the lowest number seen in the combined region of Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker and Mal-

heur counties since July 9, 2021. The number of cases was at two on March 28. The last time there was nobody in a Region 9 hospital with COVID-19 was July 8 of last year.

Overall, the number of patients in Oregon hospitals with COVID is down to 118, and 15 in intensive care, according to an update released March 28. Overall, the pandemic has seen 703,132 cases of COVID-19

reported by the OHA, and 7,074 deaths.

While COVID cases have decreased, the number of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered since the start of the year has taken a drastic drop, as well.

On Dec. 31, there were 4,112 first doses administered to adults in the county, a rate of 72.2%. There had also been 3,849 adults to get a completed series, and 2,030 booster doses admin-

istered to adults. Since the calendar turned to 2022, there have been just 50 additional first doses given to adults, 41 doses administered to complete a series, and 294 booster doses, as of March 25.

In the overall population, there have been 4,485 first doses administered, a clip of 62.6%, as of March 25. There are also 4,168 who have had a completed series, and 2,368 boosted.



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