

COVID-19 infections rising even as severe cases drop

Variant of omicron reason behind most recent spread

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SALEM — A new omicron variant of COVID-19 is driving a rise in infections, but is not expected to be a significantly severe wave of the now 110-week pandemic in Oregon, state health officials said this week.

The BA.2 “subvariant” of omicron spreads up to 80% faster than the first omicron wave, now called BA.1. It’s swept across the United States over the past month, leading to a swell of infections and hospitalizations.

It’s now the overwhelming source of new infections in Oregon, according to the latest data from the Oregon Health Authority released Friday, April 8.

The sheer speed and spread of BA.2 will cause what is by most accounts the seventh wave of new infections since COVID-19 appeared in Oregon on Feb. 28, 2020, two months after it was first found in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019.

COVID-19 cases rose for the week ending April 3, breaking a streak of nine consecutive weeks of falling cases and hospitalizations. OHA reported 1,988 new positive cases, up 42% from the previous week.

Oregon officials underlined that nearly all the severe cases requiring hospitalization and those who die from COVID-19 are not vaccinated.

While breakthrough cases in vaccinated people accounted for more than four in 10 new cases in the most recent week, those people also make up 68% of the Oregon population.

If infected, a vaccinated person has a less than 5% chance of severe illness and less than half of 1% of death. The average age of a vac-



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The omicron variant BA.2 spreads up to 80% faster than the original omicron wave, health officials say.

nated person who dies from COVID-19 is currently 80.

For the past week, deaths were up and rising. A forecast from Oregon Health & Science University’s forecast, released Friday, said there were 140 COVID-19 deaths in the most recent week, up from 99 the previous week.

“While the decline is still evident, the level of deaths per day are proving to be closer to the numbers seen during the delta wave,” OHSU reported.

Hospitalizations in Oregon fell to 95 in Oregon on Friday, near the lowest level since prior to the deadly delta variant wave last summer.

OHSU says it now expects the daily count to peak at 220 patients per day on June 10. That’s fewer than the 300 forecast two weeks ago — but with a top date a month later.

The projection was based on patterns where BA.2 took hold earlier. Several states in the Northeast have seen

increases in cases. Only Vermont is seeing an increase in hospitalizations.

In comparison, a peak of 1,178 people with COVID-19 cases were in hospitals in Oregon on Sept. 1, 2021, the peak of the delta wave. The state reported 610 deaths in September 2021, the highest monthly total of the 7,296 deaths so far in Oregon.

With omicron, more COVID-19 hospitalizations were patients who came to the hospital for other reasons and were found to have the virus during tests once admitted. Having a COVID-19 infection alongside an issue requiring a hospital visit can make the original ailment more severe.

A sign that more infections can be expected was the rise in the percentage of tests that came back positive. OHSU said test positivity had dropped to 2.5% for the week ending March 19. The rate is expected to rise to 3.4% by mid-April.

During the height of the original omicron spike,

when tests were more often at medical and public health facilities, positive test rates hit above 25% statewide in January.

However, COVID-19 test reports have fallen precipitously since the beginning of the year.

The falling totals are due at least in part to the increased availability of free rapid tests sent by the federal government to any resident who signed-up online.

The CDC has reported people are unlikely to report negative tests and less likely to report positive tests unless they develop symptoms.

OHSU said that one area of uncertainty is the impact of public behavior that could accelerate the spread of BA.2.

Mask mandates for all indoor public places in Oregon have been lifted. Brown let the state’s 2-year-old COVID-19 state of emergency lapse on April 1.

The steep drop in cases and removal of restrictions, combined with an overall

fatigue of upholding pandemic safeguards has the public returning to pre-delta spike habits, OHSU reported.

The forecast metrics show voluntary mask use has significantly decreased, while restaurant visits are matching the national average. Indoor shopping is trending higher than the national average, while attending large events is slightly lower than elsewhere.

Omicron’s speed shows up in many measurements compared to versions of COVID-19 seen before late November 2021.

The time from exposure to admission to a hospital for a severe cases has fallen from 12 to eight days on average.

The typical hospital stay has fallen from seven to five days, while intensive care unit time has dropped from 14 to 12 days.

The recovery period prior to omicron was 12 days compared to eight for earlier versions.

With little advance notification or fanfare, the state several weeks ago ended its daily synopsis of COVID-19 cases provided to the public and media since the beginning of the pandemic.

The synopsis included hospitalization levels, deaths and information such as the age, gender, location and home county of those who die will not be compiled daily.

Other summaries are being curtailed, while OHSU will release a forecast every other week rather than weekly.

OHA says the data will still be available on its many COVID-19 dashboards on its website, along with weekday posting on social media.

OHA said it was making the changes to reflect the declining number of severe cases, a decision made before the BA.2 variant reversed more than two months of declining numbers.

Charles Boyle, a spokesman for Gov. Kate Brown said this week the governor endorsed the change to the timing, number and format of the state reports used since early in the pandemic.

“As part of that shift of living with this virus over the long-term, we expect to see state agencies and entities, such as OHA and OHSU, adjust the frequency of their COVID-19 data reporting towards less frequent but still regular public reporting when cases are down,” Boyle said in a statement Thursday. “If Oregon is hit by another surge of COVID-19, we would expect them to reassess the frequency of data reporting as well.”

OHA cut back on the frequency of daily reports during last summer’s lull in cases, ending weekend and holiday daily reports. The reports were not restored when the delta variant hit Oregon, despite calls in the media and public for more information.



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