

New omicron variant drives up COVID-19 reinfection

BY GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

The BA.5 omicron variant has swept into Oregon to become the dominant strain of COVID-19 and increasing the risk of re-infection.

The Oregon Health Authority confirmed late Tuesday, July 12 that BA.5 accounted for the largest share of new infections.

It also has a higher likelihood of being able to get past vaccinations or immunity due to exposure to previous infections.

Officials said waning protection from vaccinations and earlier infections was resulting in breakthrough cases and second bouts of COVID-19.

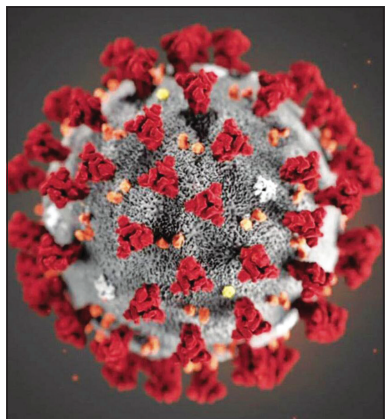
"Community-level immunity has decreased since the early omicron surge last winter," Dr. Melissa Sutton, who leads the state's efforts on respiratory viral pathogens, said in a statement. "Immunity from a COVID-19 infection may only last a few months."

The health authority reported last week that about 56% of new infections were in people who had at least one shot of the vaccine. Unvaccinated people have a far higher likelihood of severe illness and death.

Since the pandemic began in late December 2019, 6.3 million people worldwide have died, including over 1 million in the United States and 7,884 in Oregon.

As of Wednesday, July 13, 458 people were in the hospital with COVID-19, the health authority reported. Officials estimate that at least half of those patients were admitted for reasons other than COVID-19, and tested positive on admission.

The Oregon Health and Science



CDC/Contributed Photo

A COVID-19 particle is pictured in this image provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

University's most recent forecast, issued July 7, projected hospitalizations would peak at about 479 on July 12.

Severe cases will gradually decline, falling back to levels under 200 by mid-August and returning to the lows seen in April by September 1, the report said.

Dr. Peter Graven, the chief COVID-19 forecaster at Oregon Health & Science University, said the current rise in infections is the seventh wave of COVID-19 since the virus appeared in Oregon in late February 2020.

The COVID-19 virus has shown an unceasing ability to morph over the 30 months since it first broke out in Wuhan, China.

Researchers say it is too early to determine if BA.5 and the less common new variant, BA. 4, will behave like previous omicron variants that spread faster and wider than any version of the virus seen during the pandemic, but was relatively less vir-

ulent, especially for those who are vaccinated and had booster shots.

While individual outcomes are less severe, the sheer number of cases caused by the ever-more-rapidly spreading omicron variants can hit an already overstressed health care system.

Deaths fell sharply in Oregon until early April when they started to climb again.

There were 83 COVID-19-related deaths in the state in April, 136 in May and 123 in June. The highest monthly death toll was 931, in September 2021 during the delta variant surge.

Fatalities in the state from the virus echo trends around the country. The seven-day average for daily deaths in the U.S. was up 26% over the past 14 days, to 489 on July 12.

Dr. Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in San Diego, told the Associated Press Wednesday that BA.5 is "the worst variant yet."

But it is unlikely to be the last. The constant reports of new subvariants show evolution is not something that takes a millennium, but in the case of the coronavirus, months and sometimes weeks.

"I think what all of these variants are showing us is that the virus has not come anywhere close to exploring all of the evolutionary space available to it," Dr. Bruce Walker, director of the Ragon Institute in Boston, which studies infectious diseases, told Fortune magazine last week. "There are an infinite number of combinations of mutations that can arise that can affect transmissibility and immunity."

Over the past two weeks, there have been reports of a subvariant of the subvariant — BA.5.3.1 — which

has quickly spread in Germany to account for nearly a third of all new cases this week. An Australian researcher gave it the nickname of "Bad Ned" because of its N E136D mutation.

For people in Oregon who are vaccinated and had boosters, the chances of severe illness from omicron variants are 2% and death 0.6%.

The wider spread of omicron variants, the sometimes milder symptoms, and increased use of home testing make counting new infections difficult.

"We know that we're only detecting a small fraction of cases overall," said Sutton, the OHA official.

Analysis of wastewater has become a more reliable gauge of the presence of the virus in a community. The percentage of tests that come back positive also gives a snapshot of the level of community spread.

Test positivity as of July 11 was 14.6%. OHA officials have said throughout the pandemic that a positive test rate under 5% indicates a level of contagion that health officials can manage.

Breakthrough cases

The Oregon Health Authority's most recent update on COVID-19 cases, released July 7, showed 45,843 reported cases of COVID-19 infection during the month of June.

The majority of cases — 25,907, or 56.5% — were vaccine breakthrough cases in people who had some level of vaccination. Fully vaccinated and boosted people made up 41.1%.

Unvaccinated people accounted for 19,923, or 43.5%, of cases in June. More than 80% of Oregonians

eligible for inoculation have had at least one dose of the vaccine.

Residents who are fully vaccinated and have received booster shots as recommended by the CDC make up just over 47% of the population.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in Oregon in February 2020, OHA has reported 259,450 COVID-19 vaccine breakthrough cases in Oregon. Of those cases, 78,313, or 30.2%, were fully vaccinated and boosted at the time of infection.

Just 2.6% of all vaccine breakthrough cases have required hospitalization and 0.6% have died. The median age of vaccinated people who died is 80.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention currently recommends a COVID-19 vaccination for everyone age 6 months or older. Boosters are recommended for those age 5 and older.

How to avoid COVID-19 infections

The Oregon Health Authority also suggested the following measures used earlier in the pandemic to keep the virus from spreading, including:

Wearing masks indoors in public settings such as shops, gyms, and in restaurants when not eating.

When possible, large events should be outdoors, where the breath of a possibly infected person has a much higher chance to dissipate than in enclosed spaces.

People planning to visit elderly, immunocompromised or unvaccinated people should take at-home tests prior to getting together and a few days afterward.

Psilocybin

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The trend is similar to one in 2016 when the state gave local governments the ability to opt-out of legal cannabis sales, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported.

Many Eastern Oregon cities and counties banned cannabis sales initially, but some communities saw a shift in opinion after cannabis became a tax boon for municipalities once it was legalized.

Wednesday's public listening session allowed residents

to comment and ask questions. Oregon Psilocybin Services said it will post online responses to the questions in the coming weeks.

Under the measure, only licensed facilitators can possess and administer psilocybin services. Clients, who must be 21 or older, must consume the substance at an approved site under a facilitator's supervision.

The measure directs OHA to license and regulate the manufacturing, sale and provision of psilocybin services. It also created OPS, a new sec-

tion housed in OHA, to oversee the creation and implementation of a new regulatory framework.

OPS, still in its two-year development period, is aiming by year's end to establish the rules on psilocybin facilitator licensure and training, case management, compliance and product tracking, among others.

The Food and Drug Administration has named psilocybin a "breakthrough" therapy for severe depression. The designation can expedite the development of drugs that intend

to treat serious conditions and that could substantially improve upon available therapy based on preliminary clinical evidence. Outside of certain scientific research contexts, however, the substance remains illegal under federal law.

Measure 109 was one of two drug-related ballot initiatives approved by Oregon voters in November 2020. Measure 110 decriminalized the possession of small amounts of hard drugs including heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and LSD, marking another national first.

Beetle

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The infested trees in Forest Grove were cut down and chipped within 48 hours of the discovery.

In 2021, the Oregon Invasive Species Council finalized the Emerald Ash Borer Readiness and Response Plan for Oregon to guide the state in its response.

The Oregon Department of Forestry has already collected seeds from Oregon ash trees across the state to try and preserve as much of

the tree's genetic diversity as possible. Researchers will test the seeds to see if any have resistance to ash borers and if so, they may be able to breed resistance into local strains and replant them.

Oregonians, cities and towns should consider removing ash trees that are already in poor health or growing in spaces too small for them, and remove ash trees from approved street tree lists, officials said. Portland has already removed it from trees it plants in the city.

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	2:00pm	Slack — Arena
	6:00pm	Rodeo Gates Open — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	7:00pm	PRCA RODEO — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	9:00pm	Family Fun at the Thunder Room — DJ
THUR	9:00am	Tough Enough to Wear Pink Walk
	9:00am	Steer Tripping, Three Rounds
	2:00pm	Slack — Arena
	6:00pm	Rodeo Gates Open — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	7:00pm	PRCA RODEO — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
		Tough Enough to Wear Pink — Wear Pink
	9:00pm	Fun at Thunder Room after Rodeo — Stay Tuned!
FRI	10:00am	Chief Joseph Junior Parade — Main Street
	2:00pm	Slack — Arena
	6:00pm	Rodeo Gates Open — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	7:00pm	PRCA RODEO — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	9:00pm	All Teen Dance — Joseph Community Center
	9:30pm	Live Music and Dancing at Thunder Room — Whiskey Creek
SAT	10:00am	Grand Parade — Main Street
	2:30pm	Slack — Arena
	6:00pm	Rodeo Gates Open — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	7:00pm	PRCA RODEO — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	9:00pm	All Teen Dance — Joseph Community Center
	9:30pm	Live Music and Dancing at Thunder Room — Whiskey Creek
		After Rodeo — Cowboy Breakfast — Rodeo Grounds — til 3:00am
SUN	6:00am	Cowboy Breakfast — Rodeo Grounds — til 10:00am
	9:00am	Cowboy Church Service





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