

U.S. hits 700,000 COVID deaths just as cases begin to fall

By Amy Forliti and Carla K. Johnson
The Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The United States reached its latest heartbreaking pandemic milestone on October 1, eclipsing 700,000 deaths from COVID-19 just as the surge from the delta variant is starting to slow down and give overwhelmed hospitals some relief.

It took 3½ months for the U.S. to go from 600,000 to 700,000 deaths, driven by the variant's rampant spread through unvaccinated Americans. The death toll is larger than the population of Boston.

This milestone is especially frustrating to public health leaders and medical professionals on the frontlines because vaccines have been available to all eligible Americans for nearly six months and the shots overwhelmingly protect against hospitalizations and death. An estimated 70 million eligible Americans remain unvaccinated, providing kindling for the variant.

"You lose patients from COVID and it should not happen," said Debi Delapaz, a nurse manager at UF Health Jacksonville who recalled how the hospital was at one point losing eight patients a day to COVID-19 during the summer surge. "This is something that should not happen."

Despite the rising death toll, there are signs of improvement.

Nationwide, the number of people now in the hospital with COVID-19 has fallen to somewhere around 75,000 from over 93,000 in early September. New cases are on the downswing at about 112,000 per day on average, a drop of about one-third over the past 2½ weeks.

Deaths, too, appear to be declining, averaging about 1,900 a day versus more than 2,000 about a week ago.

The easing of the summer surge has been attributed to more mask wearing and more people getting vaccinated.



The decrease in case numbers could also be due to the virus having burned through susceptible people and running out of fuel in some places.

In another development, Merck said October 1 that its experimental pill for people sick with COVID-19 reduced hospitalizations and deaths by half. If it wins authorization from regulators, it will be the first pill for treating COVID-19 — and an important, easy-to-use new weapon in the arsenal against the pandemic.

All treatments now authorized in the U.S. against the coronavirus require an IV or injection.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease specialist, warned that some may see the encouraging trends as a reason to remain unvaccinated.

"It's good news we're starting to see the curves" coming down, he said. "That is not an excuse to walk away from the issue of needing to get vaccinated."

Unknowns include how flu season may strain already depleted hospital staffs and whether those who have refused to get vaccinated will change their minds.

"If you're not vaccinated or have protection from natural infection, this virus will find you," warned Mike Osterholm, director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy.

Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, began seeing a surge of COVID-19 hospitalizations in mid-July, and by the first week of August, the place was beyond capacity. It stopped elective surgeries and brought in military doctors and nurses to help care for patients.

With cases now down, the military team is scheduled to leave at the end of October.

Still, the hospital's chief medical officer, Dr. Catherine O'Neal, said the rate of hospitalizations isn't decreasing as quickly as cases in the community because the delta variant is affecting more young people who are otherwise healthy and are living much longer in the intensive care unit (ICU) on ventilators.

"It creates a lot of ICU patients that don't move anywhere," she said. And many of the patients aren't going home at all. In the last few weeks, the hospital saw several days with more than five COVID-19 deaths daily,

TRAGIC MILESTONE. Nursing coordinator Beth Springer looks into a patient's room in a COVID-19 ward at the Willis-Knighton Medical Center in Shreveport, Louisiana. A decline in COVID-19 cases in the United States over the last several weeks has given overwhelmed hospitals some relief, but administrators are bracing for yet another possible surge as cold weather drives people indoors. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

including one day when there were 10 deaths.

"We lost another dad in his 40s just a few days ago," O'Neal said. "It's continuing to happen. And that's what the tragedy of COVID is."

As for where the outbreak goes from here, "I have to tell you, my crystal ball has broken multiple times in the last two years," she said. But she added that the hospital has to be prepared for another surge at the end of November, as flu season also ramps up.

Dr. Sandra Kemmerly, system medical director for hospital quality at Ochsner Health in Louisiana, said this fourth surge of the pandemic has been harder. "It's just frustrating for people to die of vaccine-preventable illnesses," she said.

At the peak of this most recent wave, Ochsner hospitals had 1,074 COVID-19 patients on August 9. That had dropped to 208 as of September 30.

Other hospitals are seeing decreases as well. The University of Mississippi Medical Center had 146 hospitalized COVID-19 patients at its mid-August peak. That was down to 39 on October 1. Lexington Medical Center in West Columbia, South Carolina, had more than 190 in early September but just 49 on October 1.

But Kemmerly doesn't expect the decrease to last. "I fully expect to see more hospitalizations due to COVID," she said.

Like many other health professionals, Natalie Dean, a professor of biostatistics at Emory University, is taking a cautious view about the winter.

It is unclear if the coronavirus will take on the seasonal pattern of the flu, with predictable peaks in the winter as people gather indoors for the holidays. Simply because of the nation's size and diversity, there will be places that have outbreaks and surges, she said.

What's more, the uncertainties of human behavior complicate the picture. People react to risk by taking precautions, which slows viral transmission. Then, feeling safer, people mingle more freely, sparking a new wave of contagion.

"Infectious disease models are different from weather models," Dean said. "A hurricane doesn't change its course because of what the model said."

One influential model, from the University of Washington, projects new cases will bump up again this fall, but vaccine protection and infection-induced immunity will

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Festival season returns to Nepal amid declining COVID-19 cases

Continued from page 3

The Indra Jatra festival marks the end of monsoon rains and the beginning of autumn. It also celebrates the end of the rice farming season.

Armed police guarded the alleys and roads leading to the main courtyard while volunteers sprayed sanitizers and distributed masks to the devotees.

Officials, priests, religious leaders, and organizers held several meetings before deciding to go ahead with the public festival.

"If we continue to halt the festival every year because of COVID-19, there is a big chance that our tradition and rituals could just fade away. We want to save our tradition and heritage but at the same time keep everyone safe from the virus," said Gautam Shakya, the priest and main caretaker of Kumari.

Gautam said they have been making public appeals to keep away from the main venues of the festivals as far as possible, fearing the spread of the coronavirus.

"We are asking people to understand that to save the tradition, rituals, and heritage, they should keep away from the venue this year and if you are safe, then you can watch these festivals in the many years to come," he said.

Kiran Shakya of the government's Trust Corporation, which is in charge of the festivals, said special security arrangements were made to control the crowds and follow health protocols.

"We want to set an example of how a popular festival can be held safely," he said.

Bishnu Lal Shrestha, who was among the throngs of jubilant devotees waiting along the narrow streets to receive Kumari's blessing, said he was thrilled that the festivals are back after two years.

"We are praying that the gathering of devotees will not be a reason for another spread of the coronavirus but the gods will protect us," Shrestha said.

Nepal has imposed several lockdowns and other restrictions since the pandemic hit.



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MOLLY J. SMITH / Statesman Journal



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Difficulty level: Medium #48231

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last issue's puzzle

Puzzle #89725 (Easy)

All solutions available at www.sudoku.com.

8	9	3	6	7	1	4	2	5
7	2	4	9	5	3	6	8	1
1	6	5	4	8	2	3	7	9
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9	5	1	3	6	7	8	4	2
6	8	7	2	1	4	5	9	3