

New virus variant emerges as delta spike fades

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon is on alert for a new COVID-19 variant, just as the state hit record lows in its recovery from the deadly delta spike that swept the state last summer.

New COVID-19 infections fell under 100 per 100,000 people statewide last week, according to the latest County COVID-19 Community Transmission Report, released Monday.

The report showed the statewide positive test rate dropped under 6%, closing in on the 5% rate health officials have said means the spread of the virus can be controlled.

The twin marks were record lows signaling a strong recovery from the delta variant that peaked on Labor Day and has been in a fitfully slow fall in the weeks since then.

New world variant warning: omicron

The good news about lower levels of delta infections was tempered by a report on Thanksgiving by the World Health Organization of a new, likely highly contagious variant.

Assigned the Greek lettered name omicron, it was first publicly reported in southern Africa last week. By Monday, cases had shown up in Hong Kong, Australia,

Europe and Canada.

President Joe Biden said Monday the omicron variant was reason for concern, but not panic.

"We're throwing everything we have at this virus, tracking it from every angle," Biden said in an address from the White House. He planned on visiting the National Institutes of Health on Tuesday for a further update.

As of earlier this week, no cases had been reported in Oregon or elsewhere in the United States. But given the history of the virus, it's more a matter of when not if.

"Omicron has not yet been detected in the United States, but we expect it will be in the coming days due to its reported high transmissibility," Dr. Dean Sidelinger, Oregon's state epidemiologist said in a statement Monday.

The omicron variant has a structure with about 50 mutations scientists have not seen before. Many are in the spike protein that the virus uses to hook itself more firmly onto healthy cells.

Sharon Peacock, who has led genetic sequencing of COVID-19 in Britain at the University of Cambridge, told the Associated Press the new variant has mutations "consistent with enhanced transmissibility," but said that "the significance of many of the mutations is still not known."

If omicron does arrive in

the state, the next question is whether it is stronger enough to supplant delta, which has already "crowded out" other variants in the race to find the significant but shrinking pool of Oregonians who are neither vaccinated or been exposed to the virus.

Studies are underway around the world to gauge whether omicron has characteristics which will allow it to get around current vaccines.

"The vaccines have remained highly effective against other variants, and we expect the same to be true with omicron," Sidelinger said. "We should have early answers in the coming weeks."

The Oregon Health Authority said residents shouldn't wait to find out. Anyone who is not yet vaccinated should get inoculations immediately. The most effective vaccines, made by Moderna and Pfizer, require two shots spaced over about a month and another two weeks afterward to be fully effective. Booster shots are also available for any adult who had their second dose more than six months ago.

After being surprised by the rapid spread of the delta variant last summer, several countries are betting on travel bans to slow the spread of omicron while health officials can prepare for its impact. Britain has barred travelers from some African nations, while Israel

has put a freeze on all foreign visitors.

Given the history of the virus in all forms, scientist agree that the main impact — especially severe illness and death — will fall exponentially harder on the unvaccinated. The spike structure shows that it is "supercharged" to spread in unprotected populations.

Delta on the way down

News of the omicron variant overshadowed a strong health authority report on the ongoing impact of the delta variant.

According to the state's community transmission report, Deschutes County was the only large county in Oregon with a per capita new case rate over 200, and that was just barely, at 201 per 100,000. Though high compared to other parts of the state, the county's mark was a big drop from 288.3 cases per 100,000 in the previous report released Nov. 22.

The county risk levels were used until June to decide what level of restrictions to activities and gatherings would be placed on counties due to their measurements of infection and likely continued contagion. A large county above 200 cases per 100,000 would have once been placed in the "extreme" risk level, the most restrictive of four tiers.

Gov. Kate Brown and the health authority phased out

the risk level system in late June when the state closed in on a 70% vaccination rate. When the delta variant sent risk levels to new record highs, the state did not reinstate the restrictions, saying it was up to local authorities to make decisions.

Though no longer linked to restrictions, the state has continued to issue the weekly reporters. The significantly lower levels statewide in the latest report were driven in large part by several counties with large populations reporting very low numbers than in turn pulled down the state average.

Multnomah County, which includes Portland, reported 68 cases per 100,000. The state's second most populous county, Washington, reported 77. Lane County, home of the University of Oregon in Eugene, had 80. Benton County, home of Corvallis and the main campus of Oregon State University, had 50.7.

Counties that had previously seen rapid spread of the delta variant reported lower numbers as the pool of people to infect grew smaller. Umatilla County, which has seen spikes after large public events attended by significant numbers of unvaccinated people — such as the Pendleton Round-Up in September, was at 50.3. With a few exceptions, many of the less populated counties

in Eastern Oregon showed improvement in their numbers of cases and positive infection rates from high levels of the past two months.

The trend was not down everywhere. Clatsop County was one of the few counties to show a rise in numbers. It reported 114.1 cases per 100,000, nearly double the rate of 60.8 from the previous report. It also saw its positive test rate rise to 17.8%, nearly three times its previous rate of 6.8%.

Only two other counties had rates over 200 cases per 100,000: Wallowa, with a population under 7,000 people reported 237.4 cases per 100,000. The rate in Baker County, with a population of just over 16,000 people was 218.8. The health authority has said per capita figures for smaller counties are less reliable because small changes in actual numbers can cause big swings up and down on the rate. The health authority often concentrated on total case counts and positive test percentage in determining risk for less populous areas.

With a small population of just over 7,000 and its proximity to Idaho and Washington, the weekly numbers in Wallowa County have frequently swung rapidly back and forth throughout the pandemic. The past four weekly reports have listed 26, two, four and 17 new cases. That leads to ping-ponging results from extremely low to high.

PUBLIC SAFETY LOG



Nov. 19
2:53 a.m., 300 block Fourth Avenue: A deceased person is reported.
10:29 a.m., Mill Ponds/Aldermill: A person is arrested on a warrant.

11:26 a.m., 2500 block S. Roosevelt: A deceased person is reported.
Nov. 20
8:57 a.m., 400 block S. Edgewood: Attempted theft of a boat trailer.
9:14 a.m., Broadway Bumper Cars: Subjects horsing around broke a window. They are gone prior to police arrival.
10:38 p.m., 1500 block N.

Prom: Caller reports a disturbance outside her residence.
Nov. 21
1:08 a.m., 1100 block Avenue A: Caller reports his girlfriend won't let him leave the apartment.
11:20 a.m., 2300 block S. Roosevelt: Sex crimes are reported.
12:01 p.m., Police headquarters: A person came in to register as a sex offender.

7:21 p.m., 2600 block Millcreek Lane: Caller says male subject won't return her keys.
9:19 p.m., 1800 block S. Roosevelt: A business reports someone stole a hammer.
Nov. 22
9:01 a.m., U.S. Highway 101, milepost 28: Officers assist at the scene of a crash.
12:53 p.m., 12th and Franklin: Caller feels she was treated

unfairly by a construction crew and wants a callback.
12:59 p.m., Avenue G and Roosevelt: Responding to a report of a possibly intoxicated driver, the driver is located and arrested and charged with DUII.
3:02 p.m., 1500 block Lewis and Clark Road: Caller reports multiple cars on the property were entered and things were stolen. The caller believes this occurred around 5 a.m. that day.

4:22 p.m., N. Wahanna/Shore Terrace: Subject pulled a car out of the driveway and then abandoned it on the road, blocking the road.
10:11 p.m., Library: Subjects loitering at the library after hours are advised of trespass.

See Public Safety Log, Page A3



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