



Washington State Department of
Health

News Release

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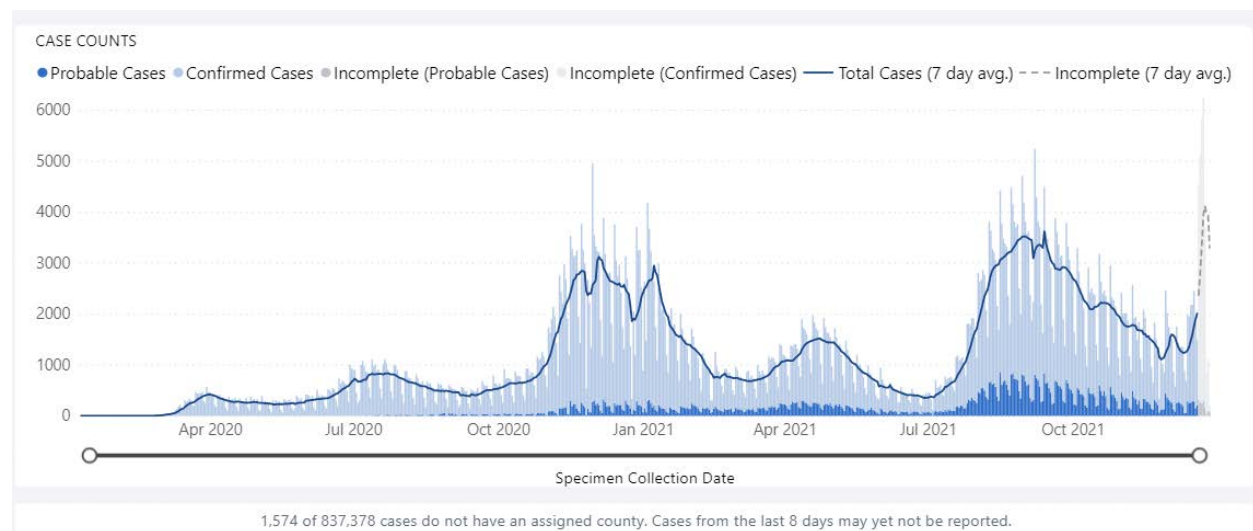
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COVID-19 cases spike significantly in the past week

Omicron variant likely cause

OLYMPIA – The state of Washington is seeing a spike in COVID-19 cases, and transmission is expected to rise in the coming weeks. While it is still too early to tell how much of the increase is due to Omicron, epidemiologists with the Washington State Department of health (DOH) agree that Omicron prevalence is increasing and is most likely the dominant strain.



While additional data are still being sent to the state, the largest single-day report of new cases so far occurred on December 24, with 6,140 new COVID-19 cases. Despite a recent increase in testing around the holidays, public health officials say the increase in new cases significantly outpaces the increase in testing. The number of cases is expected to continue to increase through the new year.

The spike in cases, together with the first cases of the flu this season, will likely mean increased hospitalizations in the near future, raising concerns about the state's health care system.

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Washington state's hospitals and clinics are already stretched and strained due to an exhausted and understaffed workforce who have been caring for more patients than ever before.

About Omicron

State Epidemiologist for Communicable Diseases, Scott Lindquist, MD, MPH, says Omicron likely has overtaken the Delta variant in Washington or will very soon based on sequencing information from the University of Washington, our state, and the CDC.

“What we are seeing now is the leading edge. Our focus is on getting a better picture of how and where Omicron is spreading,” he said. “It is not just about counting Omicron cases. It is about sampling the entire state so we can understand the prevalence of the variant beyond high-population areas. Washington state has one of the most extensive genotyping systems in the U.S., which allows us to track a variant's spread faster than many other states.”

Studies are ongoing to determine the effectiveness of vaccines and therapeutic treatments, such as monoclonal antibodies and oral antivirals, against Omicron. Based on initial information, it appears that most monoclonal antibodies may not be as effective against this variant, although Sotrovimab, a medication that the FDA is allowing for emergency use to treat COVID-19, may be more effective against Omicron.

Early results also indicate that the initial vaccine series may be less effective at preventing infection with the Omicron variant, but still offer substantial protection against infection and severe illness. Receiving a booster dose may improve protection against severe disease with Omicron.

Risk of hospitalization and death from Omicron

While it is too early to predict hospitalizations and deaths as a result of the Omicron variant, the widespread availability of vaccines and boosters lowers the risk for hospitalization and death for those who have received their full vaccination and booster shots and helps preserve our health system and hospital capacity.

In Washington state, the [COVID-19 Cases, Hospitalizations, and Deaths by Vaccination Status](#) weekly report indicates that:

- Unvaccinated 12-34 year-olds are **12 times** more likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19 compared with fully vaccinated 12-34 year-olds.
- Unvaccinated 35-64 year-olds, the likelihood of being hospitalized with COVID-19 is **18 times** higher than those in the same age group who have been fully vaccinated.
- Unvaccinated adults 65 and older are **13 times** more likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19 compared with fully vaccinated 65 year-olds and older.

Surges in hospitalizations and deaths are usually seen weeks following a spike in cases.

As of December 27, 2021, 37.4 percent of the state's residents have not been vaccinated. Nearly 10,000 Washingtonians have died of COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

What can the public do?

The best protection from any variant is to get vaccinated and boosted. "The recent emergence of Omicron is another reminder of the importance of vaccinations and boosters for everyone eligible, especially for children and adults with chronic conditions that place them at higher risk for severe illness due to COVID-19," said Dr. Tao Sheng Kwan-Gett, Chief Science Officer. "We know vaccines are safe and effective at protecting us from hospitalization and death due to COVID-19. Getting a booster is the best way to increase immunity that tends to wane over time."

It is also important that everyone six months of age and older get an annual flu vaccine to reduce your chance of getting the flu and help preserve our hospital and healthcare system capacity. The flu is a highly contagious disease that can cause mild to severe illness, and lead to hospitalization and death – even in healthy, young people. Young children, pregnant people, those with underlying health conditions, and people aged 65 and older are at high risk for flu-related complications.

Flu illness is more dangerous than the common cold for children. Each year, millions of children get sick with seasonal flu, thousands are hospitalized, and some children die from flu. Across Washington, the flu vaccine, and all recommended childhood vaccines, are available at no cost for children from birth through age 18.

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For weekly flu activity reports, educational materials, vaccine information, and other flu prevention resources, visit www.KnockOutFlu.org.

[COVID-19 booster doses](#) are now recommended for everyone 16 and older six months after completing an mRNA vaccine series (Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna) or two months after receiving the single shot Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine.

Visit [Vaccine Locator](#) or Vaccines.gov to make an appointment today to get vaccinated. If you have questions, visit [DOH's COVID-19 Vaccine Frequently Asked Questions](#) webpage or talk to your trusted health care provider. You can also call the state's COVID-19 hotline at 833-VAX-HELP. Language assistance is available.

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