

COVID Update January 11, 2022

IN SC: The Omicron variant surge continues in SC. The seven-day rolling average daily case number as reported by Johns Hopkins for the entire state, which was 7 cases per 100k population the last week in November, has now climbed to 253. The entire state is now at the 'high' transmission level, and Greenville is one of the highest with 3,329 cases per 100k population over 2 weeks (greater than 200 is considered high and last week we were at 1,633, up from just below 200 in November.) The Omicron variant is now estimated to account for 95% of cases in the state. The state set daily records, with 13,078 confirmed cases on Thursday Jan 6, an all-time high. On Friday Jan 7 it was 11,836, and on Monday Jan 10 was down to 6,497, raising the hope that the surge is abating (and not that folks have just given up on getting tested because of the long lines at test sites.) With a population of just over 5 million in S.C., we have now had over 1 million COVID cases total. Hospitalizations increased 30% but deaths remained about the same.

NATIONALLY: It took the US six months to reach 4 million cases at the beginning of the pandemic, but we had that many new cases in the past week, and it is a gross underestimate because of the scarcity of tests and the high number of asymptomatic cases. The US is now averaging more than 700,000 new COVID cases daily, with about 4.91 million cases in the week ending Saturday. That's more cases in seven days than in April, May, June and July 2021 combined. By comparison, for one week in June our daily case rate was 11,000. At the latest pace, eight Americans are testing positive every second. Each of the last five days ranks in the top five of the entire pandemic for highest case counts. The U.S. has recorded more than 60 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 837,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University data. Nationally, COVID hospitalizations are up 32% to 138,000. Nearly a fourth of hospitals are reporting bed shortages. However, a third of hospitalized patients with COVID are actually admitted for another reason, they just test positive upon admission.

VACCINE UPDATE: A new vaccine guidance from the CDC recommends a third primary dose of the Pfizer vaccine for age 5 and up, and Moderna for those age 18 and up, at 28 days after the second dose, for those with moderate to severe immune compromise. Among those who qualify are those in treatment for blood cancers, organ or stem cell transplant recipients taking immune-suppression medicine, people with advanced or untreated HIV infection and others with conditions affecting their immune system. The full guidance can be read at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations/immuno.html>

More than 207.6 million Americans – 62.5% – are fully vaccinated, according to the CDC. But in North and South America, 19 countries and territories have higher vaccination rates than the USA, according to World Health Organization data.

WHAT'S AHEAD?: Predicting the end of this surge is problematic. Omicron rose and then dropped very rapidly in South Africa, where it was first detected, but that is a much younger population than we have in the U.S., and it is summer there. A more similar environment would be the U.K., where Omicron hit earlier than in the U.S. and cases seem to be declining slowly. Various models for the U.S. predict a peak anywhere from the last week in January to mid-February, but many variables could change that.

Testing capacity with the surge has proven insufficient in the U.S., with an average of two million tests performed daily at testing facilities, but many more home tests being performed, and needed. The daily test need is estimated to be at 3-5 million in the next two weeks. The percent positive is 25% in the US (over 5% indicates too few tests are being done.)

Schools started back across the U.S. after the holiday break, with many switching to virtual learning, or being forced to send non-teacher staff to classrooms due to high absences caused by COVID.

WORLDWIDE: On Friday the WHO announced a weekly record of 9.5 million cases worldwide, acknowledging that the number was grossly below actual cases. That was a 71% increase. Deaths declined slightly but typically lag cases by about two weeks. Meanwhile, Italy imposed a vaccine mandate for everyone over the age of 50. They have a 78% vaccination rate overall and 36% have been boosted, but ICU beds are rapidly filling with COVID patients.

The Omicron variant is less frequently causing severe illness because it tends to affect mostly the upper airway, (nose, throat, bronchial tubes) causing less pneumonia (infection in the lungs.) However, the huge number of extremely ill people has already overwhelmed many health care facilities in the U.S. Vaccines appear to protect against severe illness, but a booster is required to maintain protection 5 months after the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and 2 months after the Johnson and Johnson shot. The FDA on Friday approved the Moderna third 'booster' dose be given at 5 months instead

of 6, which was already approved for the Pfizer one. The FDA is studying data on immunity conferred by the J & J vaccine followed by a Pfizer or Moderna vaccine to determine if a third dose is needed there, as well. The question of whether a fourth dose might be needed routinely has arisen. The UK on Saturday announced that government advisers were at the present time recommending against a fourth dose for nursing home residents and people over age 80 because data there showed the third dose to be 90% effective at preventing hospitalization after 3 months in people over age 65.