

California COVID surge confirmed by 48.3% positivity rate in Walgreens tests

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The recent resurgence of COVID-19 in California is confirmed by a significant upswing in positive test results at Walgreens locations across the state. Data from the pharmacy chain reveal that the **positivity rate of coronavirus tests conducted at its stores around California has reached 48.3%** — the highest figure since January and nearly double the 27% figure recorded in June.

More on coronavirus: **EG.5** emerges as top COVID virus variant in California. Here's what to know
"We had a nadir this summer, but it stopped dropping and started to increase," Dr. Erica Pan, the state epidemiologist, said in a briefing with health care professionals Tuesday. *"We have seen test positivity go up in the past two to three weeks. I'm sure many of you are anecdotally both hearing about friends and family and colleagues (getting infected) as well as seeing more circulating COVID."*

Walgreens uses data from PCR and rapid antigen tests to gauge the positivity rate, or percentage of tests signaling the presence of the virus that causes COVID-19. California's level currently surpasses the **national average of 44.7%**, which itself represents the highest rate since Walgreens began sharing test data in May 2021 from more than 5,000 outlets throughout the United States.

The California Department of Public Health reported a 10.1% statewide positivity rate for the week ending Aug. 6. But the number of people testing at pharmacies and health care facilities that report results to the state has declined substantially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, most people use rapid antigen home test kits whose results are not collected by public health authorities. This means the high Walgreens numbers are likely skewed toward people who have **already tested positive at home** or feel unwell and are obtaining a lab test to confirm the results. Still, the rising figures provide a crucial measure of directional trends. *"There's definitely more COVID around than there was a few months ago,"* Dr. Bob Wachter, UCSF's chief of medicine, told Boston radio station WBUR last week. *"This is a cyclical virus. It's around all the time and it awaits for our immunity to wane."*

The recent surge in test positivity is mirrored in **rising COVID-19-related hospitalizations across California, up 40% during the past month**. For the week ending Aug. 5, the 14-day statewide average of hospitalized patients reached 1,055, up from the pandemic's low point of 754 in the week ending July 6. The current figure is still far lower than the daily average of nearly 4,700 recorded during the same week last summer.

Nationwide, COVID hospitalizations have **surged by 43%** since late June, according to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data. There were 9,059 COVID-19 hospitalizations in the week ending July 29, up from 6,306 as of June 24. That figure also remains significantly lower than the peak observed during the omicron surge in July 2022, when weekly U.S. hospitalizations reached more than 44,000.

The percentage of emergency department visits with diagnosed COVID-19 is also rising nationwide for all ages, but especially for children under 12 and adults over 75, with rates of 1.54% and 1.69%, respectively. Pan said that California does not have reliable data for state emergency department visits but that coronavirus levels in wastewater in all parts of the state except the Central Valley are now at a "medium" level compared with "low" a week ago. Peter Chin-Hong, an infectious disease expert at UCSF, said, **"We haven't seen deaths budge yet, but deaths are a lagging indicator."**

Several factors underpin the summer surge, including **waning immune protection from prior vaccinations and infections**. People dropping **precautions such as masking**, spurred by the resumption of travel and attendance at large social gatherings, has also played a significant role. And soaring temperatures have driven more people indoors to air-conditioned spaces, creating more favorable conditions for the virus to spread. Wachter said some people might want to **consider masking in high-risk settings again as virus levels rise**. *"I think they should think about it. The risk really depends on your own personal situation. How old are you? Do you have other medical illnesses? And how risk-averse you are. I think for a lot of people, the feeling*

*of liberation — the pleasure of not having to think about COVID anymore is pretty profound,” Wachter said. “I would now put my mask back in my pocket, take it out, and **put it on if I was in a crowded indoor space.**”*

A new SARS-CoV-2 subvariant known as EG.5 has also rapidly gained prominence in California and the U.S. The World Health Organization on Wednesday upgraded the omicron offshoot to a “variant of interest.” EG.5 accounted for the largest share of genomic samples nationwide in the past week, including those in California. However, experts say there’s no evidence the emerging strain is more virulent than its predecessors or directly responsible for the summer surge.

“Right now, what we’re seeing with the changes in the viruses, they’re still susceptible to our vaccine, they’re still susceptible to our medicines, they’re still picked up by the tests,” Dr. Mandy Cohen, the new director of the CDC, said in an interview on former Biden administration adviser Andy Slavitt’s “In the Bubble” podcast. *“We’re seeing small changes that are what I would call subtypes of what we’ve seen before.”*

Pan said with COVID cases **and other respiratory infections** anticipated to increase in the fall, the health department would issue new guidelines for state schools, including recommendations based on symptoms, for the new year. *“Those should be posted very, very soon, within the next few weeks,”* she said.

Updated COVID-19 vaccines targeting the XBB.1.5 variant, dominant in the United States throughout 2023, are expected to be **available this fall, alongside this year’s flu shot.**

*“We anticipate that they are going to be available for most folks by **the third or fourth week of September,**”* Cohen said, revising a prior projection of October delivery for the new shots.

The vaccines are awaiting authorization by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the CDC before recommendations are issued. The Western States Scientific Safety Review Workgroup, which previously reviewed COVID vaccines for California, Oregon, Nevada and Washington state, has been disbanded.

To date, nearly 1.14 million people in the United States have died due to COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic. But the combination of vaccination and immunity from previous infections has driven down community transmission, while treatments such as the antiviral medication Paxlovid have helped significantly reduce the likelihood of severe illness and death from the disease.

“I don’t think we should go back to thinking about life as we did three years ago, because it’s different,” Wachter said. *“COVID is still around. It’s still a threat. It’s worth thinking about as you make your decisions whether to become more careful as the case rates go up.”*

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