

NSW could have 100,000 active cases by New Year's Eve

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21 December 2021

A national cabinet meeting on Wednesday will consider new rules, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said, adding he does not want a “culture of control and mandates”.

Even though the NSW government has said it's focused on the number of people in intensive care units, the surge in cases is putting pressure on Premier Dominic Perrottet to reverse last week's relaxation of restrictions.

Long waits for test results could compound the problem, which NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard said was caused by people getting tested before travelling interstate.

Tuesday's data suggested the third wave, dominated by the omicron variant, is accelerating in NSW and may be slowing or stabilising in Victoria. Deaths remain low, although the number of patients treated in intensive care units is creeping up.

NSW Health reported 3057 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, up from 2051 the day before, with 39 patients in intensive care, a one-day increase of six, and two deaths.

Victorian health authorities reported 1245 cases, down from 1302 the day before, 73 COVID-19 patients in intensive care, down from 81 the day before, and six deaths.



Queues for COVID-19 testing at Bondi Beach on Tuesday. *Anna Kucera*

Queensland reported 86 new cases, the state's highest daily tally, and one person in intensive care. Tasmania reported four new cases, taking its total to 14, and no one in hospital.

South Australia reported 154 cases, up from 105, and five people in hospital. Premier Steven Marshall said people arriving from NSW, Victoria and the ACT would no longer be required to be tested when they arrived if they had no COVID-19 symptoms, which often include fever, cough, tiredness or loss of taste or smell.

Despite calls from some epidemiologists to reverse his decision to drop mask-wearing requirements in NSW supermarkets, pubs and other public indoor locations, Mr Perrottet on Monday emphasised that people needed to become used to the circulation of the virus.

"We are treating the people of our state like adults," he said.

The number of people being admitted to hospitals in NSW with COVID-19 is not increasing anywhere near as fast as infections, and is far below the 1200 recorded in September.

Data analyst Mike Honey, who has been tracking the disease impact of the variants for most of the year, said he has not seen evidence of a lower rate of hospitalisation and intensive care admissions in this wave of cases.

While hospitalisation rates have been falling over the past six months from around 10 per cent of cases to 4.6 per cent, he has not seen a significant shift since omicron began to be the primary driver of cases. This suggests omicron is no more or less mild than the delta variant.

One change he has identified is a lengthening in the average time lag for omicron-related hospitalisations from five days to six.

He cautioned that reliable public data showing how many of the daily cases are omicron does not exist.

"It looks like hospitalisation [in NSW] now lags by six days [on average], not five," he said. "This could be the impact of omicron, even though my guess is that is not yet 100 per cent of cases [no reliable data]."

Based on a six-day average presentation period, on current trends Mr Honey forecast there would be 897 hospitalisations by December 27, up from 284 on Tuesday.

"If these settings continue to be a good fit, it might be an early indication that omicron is not 'mild', it just takes a bit longer for cases to need hospitalisation," he said.



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“If the coming days don’t match those lofty forecasts, that might indicate that omicron is ‘mild’ [versus delta].”

If hospitalisations accelerate a lot, Australian National University infectious diseases physician Peter Collignon said extra restrictions might be necessary. He also said the fast-spreading omicron strain appeared to be milder or no worse than previous variants.

“If hospitalisations are going up through the roof, then we may well have to do more, including mandatory masks indoors,” he said.

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