

Stubborn omicron wave sticking around for Christmas

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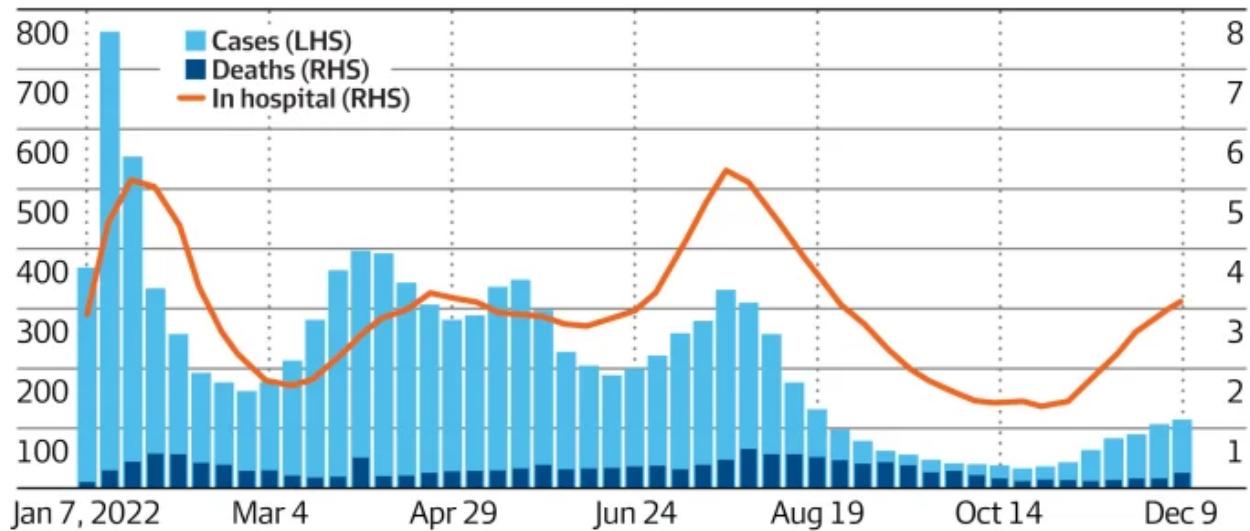


The federal health department reported 3107 COVID-19 hospital admissions across the country on Friday, up 9.2 per cent over the week and more than double the number in mid-October. The rise has been fuelled by multiple subvariants.

The ACT had the sharpest increase, with admissions up 75 per cent. There was a 28 per cent increase in South Australia, the Northern Territory was up 32 per cent and Victoria 18 per cent. Several major hospitals in Melbourne advised that only urgent patients should attend as they struggled with staff off with COVID-19.

There were 111,452 cases reported, three times higher than mid-October. Rapid tests are no longer mandatory, and when case numbers are adjusted for this underreporting (about 30 per cent), the current daily case rate is similar to early August, shortly after the winter wave began to wane in late July.

COVID-19 cases, weekly ('000s)



SOURCE: TWITTER/@DBRAEVN

Risky Christmas

Melbourne University epidemiologist Professor Nancy Baxter said the rising number of infections was due to waning immunity, but underreporting was camouflaging the prevalence of sickness.

“We think probably at least one in 50 Australians to one in 25 Australians currently have COVID,” Professor Baxter said.

“That’s a lot of COVID in circulation. And it’s peaking in the next week or two. That means there are going to be a lot of cases at Christmas where people want to get together. There’s a lot of risk.”

Cases are rising more slowly in NSW and Victoria, giving authorities some hope the wave will peak in the next week or so. But the current outbreak is likely to run into the holiday season, disappointing predictions the wave would be similar to Europe where cases fell sharply.

In NSW, 37,088 people were diagnosed in the week ending December 3, up 9.1 per cent compared to a 15.2 per cent increase the previous week.

NSW Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant said health authorities expected to reach the peak of the current wave in the “coming week or so”.

“And then we will see a decline in cases,” Dr Chant said.



NSW chief health officer Dr Kerry Chant is predicting cases in NSW will peak in the next “week or so”. *Brook Mitchell*

Slowing wave growth in NSW is masking continued strong case growth in particular regions. Hunters Hill local government area has a reproduction rate (Reff) of 1.33, and Broken Hill LGA recorded a Reff of 1.49, according to estimates by COVID-19 data analyst Mike Honey. Infection waves wane once the Reff drops below one.

Test positivity is also very high in some regions. Georges River and Penrith in Sydney recorded 29 per cent positive PCR test results, which suggests much higher levels of infection than what is being tested for.

Variants cause uncertainty

Similar patterns are being seen in Melbourne. The Frankston region again reported big case loads and Mr Honey noted the region had “an extremely high case rate of over 1500/100K for the week” and about 11 per cent of Victoria’s current infectious.

Victorian chief health officer Brett Sutton said: “COVID-19 case numbers have shown signs of stabilising. However, there remains significant uncertainty around the duration and severity of this wave due to the role of multiple new variants circulating in Victoria.”

Professor Sutton said no single subvariant significantly predominated among circulating strains. The recombinant strain XBF and the omicron subvariant BQ.1 have shown significant growth in Victoria, accounting for 20 per cent and 25 per cent of the average proportion in wastewater surveillance respectively.

The Actuaries Institute has estimated there have been about 15,400 more deaths than normally expected (known as excess mortality) for the first eight months of the year.

The institute said about a third (5100) of these excess deaths had no mention of COVID-19 on their death certificate, and there was speculation this could be people who were cocooned from disease during the lockdown and border closures who were now dying from other causes.



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