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# The Post-Thanksgiving COVID-19 Surge Is Here: What to Expect Now

Written by Roz Plater on December 10, 2020 — Fact checked by Maria Gifford





Experts caution that the spread of COVID-19 could get worse this month as the holiday season progresses. William Campbell/Getty Images

- **Health officials say the predicted surge of post-Thanksgiving COVID-19 cases has arrived, with the United States topping 200,000 new cases and 3,000 deaths per day.**
- **They say the surge is overwhelming hospitals and straining already exhausted healthcare workers.**
- **Experts warn that the number of cases and deaths could rise even more this month as the holiday season progresses.**

Two weeks after Thanksgiving, the spike on COVID-19 tracking graphs in the United States is a straight line going in the wrong direction.


The number of new cases is up [more than 20 percent](#) from 2 weeks ago.

The number of hospitalizations has increased by 21 percent.

The number of deaths has jumped 39 percent, with the United States surpassing 3,000 deaths in 1 day for the first time.

The surge in cases predicted after the Thanksgiving holiday appears to be here.

And it doesn't appear this is the peak either.

[Dr. Robert Redfield](#) , director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is predicting the COVID-19 crisis is going to get much more deadly.

“We are in the timeframe now that probably for the next 60 to 90 days we’re going to have more deaths per day than we had at 9/11 or we had at Pearl Harbor,” Redfield [said](#) during an event Thursday hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations.

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# Field hospitals are back

Hospitals are already running out of intensive care unit (ICU) beds or are dangerously close to doing so.

Many are scrambling to find alternatives to take the pressure off.

Massachusetts [opened](#) a field hospital for people with COVID-19 on Sunday evening. The indoor arena and convention center in Worcester can accommodate 220 people. It's the same site the state used during a COVID-19 surge in the spring.

Rhode Island now has [two field hospitals](#): one at its convention center in Providence, the other at an old bank building in Cranston.

And in Reno, Nevada, the Renown Regional Medical Center has [converted](#) its parking garage into a COVID-19 wing where it has already treated more than 200 people.

But finding bed space isn't their only problem.

"Adding beds is not the complicated part," said [Dr. George Rutherford III](#), a professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine.

“It’s getting the people to staff the beds, especially the intensive care beds,” he told Healthline. “You have to get more people or try to keep the workforce as robust as possible.”

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## Urgent staffing shortages

The number of new cases is rising so rapidly, hospitals are having a tough time finding enough highly trained staff and keeping the ones they have healthy.

On Thursday, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Mayor Tim Keller [told MSNBC](#) that ICU beds in his area are at 118 percent capacity, and they’re “maxed out” on healthcare workers.

He said they’re heavily recruiting retired workers to come back into the workforce to help, and trying to find workers they can fly in from other states.

Hospitals in California’s Central Valley are also [short-staffed](#) as hundreds of healthcare workers are in quarantine after being exposed to the new coronavirus.

Late last month, more than 900 Mayo Clinic workers in the Midwest were diagnosed with COVID-19. Another 600 were in quarantine after being exposed to the virus.

Mayo officials temporarily shut down five of its clinics in southern Minnesota and sent those workers to staff other critical care sites during the surge.

Rutherford said hospitals are trying to make contracts with traveling healthcare workers, such as ICU nurses, that they can fly in.

But the competition is tough as other states are surging at the same time.

“You can get your nurses certified in taking care of ICU patients,” Rutherford said. “That’s usually a long-term process, but you can probably bring people up to lower levels of care relatively quickly.”

“The most important thing is the vaccine,” he explained. “That’s the reason this group is being targeted first for vaccination.”

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## Workers facing exhaustion

"I'm petrified, scared beyond belief. I think we're just beginning to see this surge and that it's going to get so much worse before it gets better," said [Dr. Mauricio Heilbron](#), a surgeon and vice chief of staff at St. Mary's Medical Center in Long Beach, California.

"I'm on call for surgery 30 of the next 34 days. I gave up Thanksgiving. I'm working Christmas and New Year's because we just need bodies here, and we're all exhausted," he told Healthline.

"This is my job. It's what I trained for. This is what I'm supposed to do, but we didn't sign up for this avalanche of death," he said.

"I just wish we could band together, do the masks, stay home," Heilbron added. "We need our leaders to give us a break on rent and mortgages for a month, where nobody has to worry about bills. That way we could shut

this down to a manageable level. “

## Prognosis?

Rutherford said the domino string of closures and partial closures around the country may help the surge.

“It could help get this phase of acute transmission under control, hopefully help keep the ICUs open,” he explained. “We need to get it under control now and not let it rage.”


But other experts say hospitals and workers might not get much relief until vaccines are underway.

“I suspect that until vaccination uptake is sufficient, hospitals around the country will be continually worrying about capacity, staffing, and unable to render care at the level they are accustomed to,” [Dr. Amesh Adalja](#), a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security in Maryland, told Healthline.

On Friday, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) gave its [approval](#) for emergency use authorization for the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine.

The FDA is expected to give it the green light early next week. Then healthcare workers could get the first doses.

But Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa are up next, and they could result in another wave of new cases.

[Dr. Anthony Fauci](#) , the director of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, warned that we won't likely see the full impact of the Thanksgiving surge for another week or so.



And as the other holidays approach, unless we make behavior changes, we could be looking at a surge on top of a surge.

“They’re going to be superimposed on each other,” Fauci [told](#) New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo at a news conference on Monday.

“More people are going to travel over Christmas, they’re going to have more of those family and friend gatherings... So if those two things happen and we don’t listen and mitigate well, we could start to see things really get bad the middle of January,” he said.

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