

# Florida's 4th COVID surge came fast and strong; here's what's ahead

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By now, scientists expected the omicron surge in Florida to be nearly over. Instead, omicron lingers, ensuring its place in the pandemic as the wave that infects more Floridians than all previous waves.

The new forecast projects about four more weeks before the omicron wave diminishes to give Floridians a respite.

While no one knows exactly what COVID-19 is going to do next, most experts see hope in the much larger immune population in the state. Between those who caught the virus during the omicron surge and the increasing number of people who are vaccinated and boosted, much of Florida should have some protection against future variants.

“I can't imagine COVID disappearing but with all the population immunity, future waves may be small and fairly benign,” said Ira Longini, a University of Florida professor of biostatistics and co-creator of the university's omicron model.

At this point in the pandemic, most experts have given up on herd immunity against COVID-19, in which enough people become immune to the virus that it can no longer spread. Instead, they are hopeful for population immunity,

which makes the disease less serious for those who are infected or become reinfected.

Longini said Florida likely will see a future where the virus that causes COVID-19 will become mild over time, not because of mutations in the virus that make it less severe, but because of more population immunity.

“Eventually we will be in an endemic state with many variants co-circulating,” he said. “Once you’ve been infected or vaccinated, maybe you develop immunity to severe disease like with seasonal coronaviruses such as influenza A and B. They don’t cause severe disease in humans anymore, but we get infected with them over and over.”

## **How omicron stacked up**

So far, each of the four waves of coronavirus that has swept through Florida has had one commonality: the strain present at that time preyed on people with weak immune systems. The early waves, such as the summer of 2020 and the winter of 2020-21, took mostly the lives of the elderly or those with chronic diseases.

Delta, which arrived in summer 2021, proved to be an especially deadly wave in Florida, targeting the old and young who mostly lacked vaccines that offered protection.

The omicron wave turned out to be quicker-hitting and lower intensity on an individual basis but higher intensity on a population basis.

In Florida, omicron peaked at the highest level of new cases of any wave, more than 60,000 in one day, or three times the summit of the delta surge. Deaths are always the last number to move, in any wave, and omicron deaths in

Florida are accumulating now, although well below delta's total of nearly 22,000.

“We won't know the exact toll of omicron for several weeks,” notes Scott Herr, a computer scientist who tracks COVID-19 in Florida. “My guesstimate would be somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000 deaths, possibly more. The biggest unknown is how long the ‘tail’ will be from the peak until the wave ends.”

**Deaths nationwide from omicron are still on the rise**, too, but already omicron showed the country that dying from COVID is preventable.

As **Axios.com** noted: The **overwhelming majority** of people dying from COVID during omicron were unvaccinated.

Thomas Hladish, a research scientist at the University of Florida in the Department of Biology, said because omicron was highly infectious, “morgues would have been overflowing without vaccines.”

## **Why omicron has been unpredictable**

With delta present in Florida at low levels by Thanksgiving, omicron came on fast and strong. Yet, even as scientists looked to where the variant was first detected, South Africa, for clues, omicron's quick rise and fall in Florida didn't happen as expected.

After a surge in infections in December, scientists at the University of Florida issued a revised forecast suggesting omicron would peak in Florida by mid-January and diminish by the end of the month with the same speed that it spiked. However, the variant's path hasn't followed predictions, taking much longer than expected for new cases to decline.

“It’s a bit surprising at this point that omicron wave is not dropping off more quickly,” said Thomas Hladish, a research scientist at the University of Florida in the Department of Biology. “Our model predicted omicron would be over at this point. Clearly, we are well past the peak and we are not totally done with transmission.”

Hladish believes the arrival of a subvariant of omicron, **BA.2**, with its slightly superior infectiousness than the original omicron, has slowed the drop in infections across the state and extended the tail of the wave.

“On the upside,” he said, “BA.2 doesn’t seem to be more dangerous. Vaccines still offer protection and I think we can expect those infected with the first omicron will not be susceptible to the new one.”

## **What the future holds**

Some variants rise to the level of international concern, others don’t. No one knows for certain what triggers a variant to become infectious enough to bring a new wave to Florida — waning immunity, seasonality, increased indoor activity, or something else entirely.

“We’ve got to remain humble about this,” said Howard Forman, a professor of public health at Yale University. “What I am noticing is waves in Florida are separated by six months, making it hard to know whether it’s seasonal or because of waning immunity or both combined with when a variant comes that has different antigenic makeup.”

Omicron swept through Florida about six months after delta arrived, he noted. If that pattern continues, Florida would get its next wave during summer, as it did in 2020 and 2021.

But some experts believe Florida could get an even longer reprieve.

“I think it’s a safe bet to say we will see another wave but how long it’s going to take depends,” Hladish said. “I expect it will be delayed by the fact omicron has been so large. But it really hinges upon what the next variant looks like and whether it has immune escape relative to omicron. Right now, that’s just not knowable.”

Also hard to know is whether successive waves that sweep through the state will be more or less severe.

“What the coronavirus is doing is typical,” said Dr. Elena Cyrus, assistant professor in the department of population health sciences at University of Central Florida College of Medicine. “Once we as hosts adapt, the virus weakens in terms of severity. I think will become endemic and more manageable in terms of living with it as a virus.”

Even more, she said, the therapies and vaccines likely will evolve to offer better protection and response, and minimize disruption to lives.

Although even a mild case of COVID-19 could be disruptive, she said. “The flu is manageable but it, still affects productivity, puts a drain on health care and affects our overall social well-being,” Cyrus said.

## **How hospitals are preparing**

The four waves of the pandemic in Florida have required heroic feats from health care workers. While many stressors from the early pandemic have abated, patients continue to arrive at [\*\*Florida’s hospitals\*\*](#) with COVID. Yet, omicron has stressed Florida hospitals in a different way than any prior wave.

With so many health care workers infected during the omicron surge, hospitals were challenged with continuing to treat patients with fewer staff members. Fortunately, the level of sickness and lengths of hospital stays for COVID patients was less, said Dr. Joshua Lenchus, chief medical officer of Broward Health.

Now, even before omicron fully diminishes, Lenchus said the hospital system is preparing for the next wave, stocking up on supplies and medications. “It’s like being prepared for hurricane season in March or April before the season begins.”

Inside HCA’s 14 hospitals on Florida’s east coast, omicron offers some hope for what’s ahead, said Dr. Jason Kelly, division chief medical officer for HCA Florida hospitals.

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“With the latest wave I think we really are following the natural evolution of viruses in which they tend to get more infectious, but on a case-by-case basis less severe,” Kelly said. “That’s definitely what we have seen, more patients on a regular hospital floor rather than in the ICU.”

Even if the virus continues to mutate, Kelly said, physicians know more about how to keep COVID patients alive. “COVID has accelerated our ability and comfort level with learning on the fly.”

Going forward he’s optimistic the worst is behind Florida. “I think we can expect waves but they will be shorter, the peaks lower and they will be less severe.”

Hladish said Floridians should think about COVID as a virus that is here to stay.

“I don’t think we will see a time in our lifetimes when it’s gone, but the goal is to keep moving toward making this a nuisance rather than a crisis.”