The Times-Tribune

We're *All* About It

COVID-19 cases in NEPA on rise

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BY JIM LOCKWOOD
STAFF WRITER

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TIPS TO STAY HEALTHY
Here's what you can do to protect yourself from respiratory viruses such as COVID-19. **B9**

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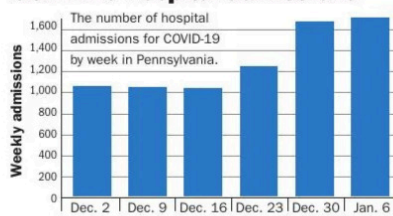
rose again, ending the year at about the same level as the start of the year, according to data from the state Department of Health.

In some ways, the COVID virus and its variants now seem akin to the flu, but the jury on that is still out, Scranton Primary Health Care Center CEO Joseph Hollander said.

"I suspect it is, but I don't think any of us know the answer to that yet," Hollander said. "It appears that it's going to be a situation annually similar to the flu," in which health officials try to determine months in advance which variants to target with annual vaccine shots.

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COVID-19 hospital admissions

The number of hospital admissions for COVID-19 by week in Pennsylvania.

[Bar chart: Weekly admissions, values approximately 1,050 (Dec. 2), 1,025 (Dec. 9), 1,000 (Dec. 16), 1,250 (Dec. 23), 1,600 (Dec. 30), 1,650 (Jan. 6)]

SOURCE: PA. DEPT. OF HEALTH

KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

COVID: Keeping tabs on virus

Still, COVID remains more complex than the flu and not fully understood, especially the so-called "long-haul" version. It's not entirely clear why COVID affects people differently, with some experiencing mild symptoms that fade quickly but others getting hit with more severe and persistent health impacts.

"Long-haul cases are scary. Nobody really knows if you're going to get it and how long you're going to get it," Hollander said.

Protocol responses

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Scranton Primary also requires anyone with respiratory or flu-like symptoms to wear a mask, and providers and staff must wear masks when interacting with those exhibiting symptoms. The facility also keeps a staffer stationed at entrances to screen people for COVID symptoms and take temperatures.

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Masks also have returned elsewhere.

Earlier this month, visitors and employees at the Electric City Trolley Museum were required to wear face masks on the premises. Steamtown National Historic Site, which is on the same premises, informed the museum of the policy going into effect until further notice. United States Department of the Interior guidelines require masks when hospital admission levels for COVID-19 are high. The Centers for Disease Con-

trol and Prevention classified Lackawanna County as high in the community risk level data.

Commonwealth Health also is seeing an increase in all respiratory diseases of COVID, RSV and influenza at facilities in Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, said Annmarie Poslock, Commonwealth Health's vice president of marketing and communications.

But COVID numbers remain low compared to pandemic levels and Commonwealth is not requiring COVID testing for procedures, and nonpatients are still permitted to wait inside for patients having outpatient procedures, Poslock said.

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Pennsylvania data

According to the state Department of Health statewide data posted online:

Emergency department visits
The percentage of emergency department visits with a COVID-19 diagnosis trended up during December 2023, from about 2.2% on Dec. 1 to slightly over 3.5% by year-end. That percentage started out at about 2.8% in early January 2023 and steadily dropped to less than half of a percent during summer months, before rising anew during fall and early winter.

New hospital admissions
Weekly COVID-19 new hospital admissions also rose during December 2023, from over 1,000 on Dec. 2, to about 1,700 by Jan. 6, 2024. Those new admissions began at around 1,700 in January 2023, fell to less than 200 around June and thereafter generally increased throughout summer, fall and early winter, spiking around the turn of the new year from over 1,200 to around 1,700 again, which was back to the level at the start of 2023.

Deaths
COVID-19 deaths by week decreased during December 2023, from just under 100 on Dec. 2, to leveling off at about 90 during the rest of that month, and then falling to under 80 by Jan. 6, 2024. COVID-19 weekly deaths for the year of 2023 started out at slightly over 200 and generally fell to below 20 by midsummer and increased to about 90 by year-end, and to around 75 as of Jan. 6, 2024.

of an abundance of caution," Poslock said in a statement.

Masking is strongly recommended for visitors to patient rooms, for those testing positive for COVID or who have been around someone with COVID; as well as for those with symptoms like fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath or a runny nose, Poslock said. Otherwise, masking is optional and Commonwealth's visitation policies are unchanged.

Home test kits and wastewater sampling

COVID data tends to be representative and not necessarily comprehensive.

For example, while medical facilities must timely report positive testing to the state, people using home test kits do not have any such reporting requirement.

"That's part of the issue — nobody's reporting home

testing," Hollander said. "I suspect that there's a fair percentage of the population that don't even bother to test because they don't want to know," as well as people who test positive but then don't isolate until they're negative. "It's really problematic."

One catch-all method of tracking COVID's presence in a community or region is through testing of wastewater for concentrations of the virus and variants. Such sampling tests wastewater for the presence of genetic material, or ribonucleic acid, of the virus that infected people shed in their feces even if they do not have symptoms.

Some wastewater systems in Pennsylvania submit samples to a company called Biobot Analytics of Massachusetts. Biobot's website shows data for 11 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, including Lackawanna and Luzerne counties. The other counties are Bucks, Butler, Chester, Dauphin, Erie, Franklin, Indiana, Montgomery and Westmoreland.

The Biobot data shows that on July 22, 2023, Lackawanna County had 217 copies of the SARS-CoV-2 virus per milliliter, and Luzerne had 196, both of which were lower than the national average on that day of 279.

Both of the NEPA counties then generally had rises in copies per milliliter, though with fluctuations, over the next five months; and both peaked on Dec. 30, 2023, well above the nationwide average of effective wastewater concentration. Lackawanna peaked at 2,659 copies per ml and Luzerne topped out at 2,429, as compared to the nationwide average of 1,317 for that day.

By Jan. 13, 2024, Lackawanna fell to 1,900 copies and Luzerne dropped to 1,447, as compared to the nationwide average of 1,131 for that day.

Hospital admissions

The Pennsylvania Department of Health also keeps tabs on COVID by tracking hospital admissions and emergency room visits.

Data from the PA DOH

posted on a nationwide map of counties on the website of the CDC showed that, as of Jan. 6, 2024, Pennsylvania had a lower percentage change of new hospital admissions of confirmed COVID-19 during the prior week, as compared to the nationwide percentage; but the state had a higher number of new COVID-19 admissions per 100,000 people.

Lackawanna, Luzerne, Pike, Schuylkill, Wayne and Wyoming counties each had a higher number of new COVID-19 admissions than the state did, while Monroe and Susquehanna had lower numbers than the state.

Among these counties, Schuylkill was an outlier for COVID-19, having the most new hospital admissions of confirmed COVID-19 during the prior week, 121; the highest percent change, a whopping 98.4%; and the most new COVID-19 hospital admissions per 100,000 population, 36.

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CHRISTOPHER DOLAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A machine used to test samples for COVID, RSV and the flu is seen Friday at Scranton Primary Health Care Center in Scranton.

How to stay healthy as flu, COVID spreading

BY CARLA K. JOHNSON
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Winter is here, inflicting its usual array of symptoms — coughs, nasal congestion, fatigue and fever — and, this year, a new COVID-19 variant is dominating the scoreboard.

COVID-19 is leading hospital admissions among the respiratory viruses, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Last week, 25 U.S. states had high or very high levels for respiratory illnesses with fever, cough and other symptoms. That's down from 37 states the week before, the CDC said.

Since the beginning of October, there have been at least 16 million illnesses, 180,000 hospitalizations, and 11,000 deaths from flu so far this season. The CDC said 47 children have died of flu.

January can be the worst month for these illnesses. With vaccination rates low, what can you do to protect yourself from respiratory viruses, including influenza, COVID-19 and RSV?

Back to basics

Hand-washing remains crucial to reducing the spread of viral infections. Take your time at the sink. Twenty seconds is recommended. If you feel silly singing "Happy Birthday" twice while you scrub with soapy water, count to 20. Slowly.

Use hand sanitizer with 60% alcohol when you don't have access to soap and water.

Also, wear a mask in crowded areas. Increase ventilation in your workplace and home.

Not too late to vaccinate

In the United States, only 17% of those eligible have received the updated COVID-19 vaccine, which provides good protection against the now-dominant JN.1 variant.

It's not too late to roll up your sleeve. While you're at it, make sure you've had your annual flu shot. Those 60 and older may want to get the RSV vaccine, which also is recommended during pregnancy to prevent RSV in infants.

When you have children at home

Young children seem to pick up every germ going around. Can their parents avoid getting sick?

This time of year, children are indoors in close quarters with other kids, touching the same toys and surfaces, said Jennifer Sonney of University of Washington School of Nursing in Seattle. Some haven't learned to cover their coughs and they simply haven't been exposed to many illnesses, so their immune systems are still developing.

It's important to take care of yourself if you're a parent or caregiver of young children, said Sonney, who is immediate past president of the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners.

"We know if you are sleep deprived or dehydrated or experiencing a lot of stress, that can compromise your immune function," Sonney said.

Having young children is very demanding, "so all of this advice needs to be interpreted within the context of reality," she said. "Despite doing everything right, kids are still going to get colds."

A special note if your baby is sick: It's a good idea to have saline drops and a bulb syringe at home. They can be used to clear mucus from tiny nostrils.

"A couple drops of saline into one nostril and suction it and then do the other side," Sonney said. "Doing that before eating and sleep is going to help a lot."

A home kit for children could also include acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fevers, tissues for runny noses and water bottles or sippy cups for staying hydrated.

Test to treat

If you do get sick, prompt testing can help determine whether you have COVID-19 or influenza. That's important to see if you need one of the medicines that can help prevent severe illness: Paxlovid for COVID-19 and Tamiflu for flu.

If you don't have a test kit at home, look for a test-to-treat site at a pharmacy clinic or health center near your. There is also a free home-based test-to-treat program for adults who are uninsured or rely on government health insurance.

People walk down the Brooklyn Bridge during a January 2022 snow storm in New York.

ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

How to stay warm, avoid frostbite this winter

BY TRISHA AHMED AND MARK VANCLEAVE
ASSOCIATED PRESS/
REPORT FOR AMERICA

MINNEAPOLIS — As a bout of bitter and deadly cold sweeps the U.S., millions of Americans are being told to dress in layers if they must go outside.

In places that rarely experience bone-chilling temperatures, that advice can be confounding. What does it mean to layer up? Is it different from just putting on a coat? Is there a way to do it wrong?

People in Minnesota, a state that is no stranger to the cold, have wisdom to share.

What is layering?

Layering means wearing multiple pieces of clothing to keep your body comfortable in cold weather. Each layer creates an insulating pocket of air that protects you better than just wearing a big jacket, and layering helps move sweat and moisture away from your skin.

No matter how cold it is, you're probably going to sweat when you go outside and start moving, said Claire Wilson, executive director of The Loppet Foundation — a nonprofit that promotes winter recreation and activities in Minneapolis.

If you're wearing the correct layers, you can feel perspiration wick away from your body, she said. The idea is to add another layer if you get cold, or take off a layer when you get hot or wet.

Avoid cotton and wetness

Wilson said she loves to shop at thrift stores for layers that won't break the bank.

"Just look for things that aren't cotton," she said. Cotton absorbs moisture, so it stays wet longer, Wilson explained. Cotton socks can get wet in your boots or shoes if you walk in the snow, and a cotton shirt under your jacket can get wet with sweat. Cotton won't dry quickly, so you'll get colder, she said.

Instead, choose wool socks and fabrics made of fleece, polyester or polypropylene, she said. You can also repurpose old vests and shirts, which are great at keeping your core warm.

Think of three main layers

Wilson recommends starting with a base layer, then a mid layer, and then an outer layer.

The base layer is closest to your skin, so it's important for the fabric to wick away moisture, she said. Choose polyester over cotton for this. Then, wear a mid layer — a vest or a shirt — to keep your core warm. Some people choose to wear more than one mid layer. Finally, wear a traditional winter jacket that breaks the wind a little but also insulates you, Wilson said.

Dress to prevent frostbite

Frostbite — a painful injury in which skin freezes, blood flow decreases and tissue gets damaged — can happen within minutes in cold weather when skin is not adequately covered.

"We see people with frostbite inside their shoes and gloves all the time," said Dr. James Miner, chief of emergency medicine at Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis.

Symptoms include blistering of the skin because it's damaged, along with bruising and swelling. Frostbite can even result in the loss of a limb, if it's not properly treated.

The hospital sees about a dozen people a day with frostbite when temperatures hover near zero, Miner said.

Layering up can prevent frostbite because it traps a bit of insulating air between each layer of fabric, Miner said. It's more effective than simply wearing a big coat because layers "tend to keep the moisture from outside — or the moisture from your body — from traveling as far as it gets trapped" by the air within each layer.

Miner recommends a waterproof outer layer, like a raincoat, to keep the lower layers dry.

Children typically require one more layer than adults, said Toni Hauser, supervisor of emergency preparedness and response for the Minneapolis Health Department. Hauser suggests keeping extra clothing or blankets in your car as well, in case you run out of gas or your car breaks down and you need to be outside.

Protect specific body parts

"Three words: Cover Your Bum (CYB)!" the city of Minneapolis says in a blog post about staying warm in cold weather. In other words, wear a winter jacket that falls closer to your knees than your hips.

The post also recommends keeping your legs warm with fleece-lined leggings or a pair of long underwear under your pants. Woolen socks and winter boots are a big help, too. Fur-lined gloves or mittens can also keep your hands warm and prevent dry skin. And keep your ears cozy with ear muffs or a hat.

PDF of the article

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