Respiratory Illnesses

COVID-19 Activity Increases as Prevalence of JN.1 Variant Continues to Rise

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CDC is posting updates on respiratory viruses every week; for the latest information, please visit CDC Respiratory Virus Updates.

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As the new year takes off, CDC continues to track the rise of JN.1 across the country. An offspring of BA.2.86, JN.1 is now the most widely circulating variant of SARS-CoV-2 in the United States and globally. At this time, there is no evidence that JN.1 causes more severe disease.

As of January 5, 2024, JN.1 is estimated to account for approximately 62% (range 55-68%) of all currently circulating SARS-CoV-2 variants, an increase from the estimated prevalence of 44% (range 39-50%) two weeks ago. CDC is also observing an increase in the prevalence of JN.1 in international travelers and wastewater viral levels, as well as in most regions around the globe.

COVID-19 infection levels in context

COVID-19 activity is currently high. COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths have increased in recent weeks. JN.1 may be intensifying the spread of COVID-19 this winter.

COVID-19 infections are now causing severe disease less frequently than earlier in the pandemic. Infection levels measured using wastewater and test positivity, which capture both symptomatic and asymptomatic infections, are higher than the year before (currently estimated as being ~27% and ~17% higher, respectively). Wastewater viral levels, in particular, have increased rapidly over the last several weeks.

By comparison, measures of COVID-19-related illness requiring medical attention, such as emergency department visit rates, have also increased, but to a lesser extent and remain 21% *lower* than they were at the same time the year before. Furthermore, the number of COVID-19 hospitalizations are 22% lower than observed the year before, and the percent of total deaths associated with COVID-19 are 38% lower.

This change in the relationship between infection levels and illness severity is related to greater immune protection levels provided by vaccines, prior infection, or both. Over 97% of people have natural or vaccine-induced antibodies against the virus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2). This immune protection can fade over time but tends to last longer for preventing severe disease than for preventing infections.

It is also important to remember that COVID-19 and the longer-term effects of COVID-19, such as Long COVID, remain important public health threats, especially for people who are at higher risk of severe illness.

What's new:

- COVID-19 hospitalizations increased 20.4% the week ending December 30, 2023. In that same period, deaths went up by 12.5%, with COVID-19 deaths accounting for 3.6% of total deaths in the United States.
- Wastewater viral activity levels, an important tool used to detect increases of COVID-19 transmission in the community, are currently high and increasing in all regions. As of December 25, 2023, 66% of wastewater samples had JN.1 as the dominant variant, up from 58% the previous week.
- JN1.1 is not only rising in the United States, but globally as well. JN.1 is the most prevalent variant around the world. It is the dominant variant in Europe and is rising sharply in Asia.
- Not enough Americans are vaccinated. As of December 30, 2023, only 8% of children and 19% of adults report having received the updated COVID-19 vaccine. Only 38% of adults age 65 years and older report having received this vaccine, which is concerning given that they are at higher risk of hospitalization from COVID-19.
- For additional information on the current status of COVID-19 and other viral respiratory illness in the United States, please see the Respiratory Virus Data Channel Weekly Snapshot.

Protect yourself and others

Current COVID-19 vaccines are expected to increase protection against JN.1, as they do against other variants, by helping prevent severe illness. The following actions can help protect you and your loved ones against severe COVID-19:

- Get your updated COVID-19 vaccine.
- Test if you develop respiratory symptoms or are exposed to someone who has COVID-19.
- Talk to a healthcare provider about treatment if you test positive and are at higher risk for severe COVID-19.
- Help reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Improving your indoor air quality is one of the best ways to prevent spread. This can be as simple as using a **portable air cleaner** or **opening windows** (for those with pleasant winter weather). And if your home thermostat offers a **FAN** option, turn it from AUTO to ON when you have visitors to keep air running continuously.

Learn more about other ways to help reduce spread, including wearing masks, washing hands frequently, and increasing space and distancing.

Last Reviewed: January 5, 2024

Source: National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases