



## Public Health Brief

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## Nearly 10,000 COVID deaths last month, New Recommendations

Current Situation: Holiday gatherings and the circulation of a new SARS-CoV-2 variant—the WHO [variant of interest JN.1](#)—led to an increased number of COVID-19 cases globally last month, WHO officials said this week. [Nearly 10,000 COVID-19-related deaths](#) were reported in December and hospital admissions grew by more than 40% in the almost 50 countries that continue to share pandemic trend information, mostly in Europe and the Americas.

The US is experiencing the [second largest COVID-19 wave](#) since the start of the pandemic, based on [wastewater data](#), and [more than 1,600 people died](#) of the disease the week of December 9, 2023, the last week of complete [US CDC data](#). Experts predict the surge could reach its peak this week or soon after, but [high transmission levels are expected to continue](#) for at least another month. The [JN.1 variant](#), an offspring of the BA.2.86 Omicron subvariant of SARS-CoV-2, accounts for an [estimated 62%](#) of US COVID-19 cases. Though the number of US COVID-19 hospitalizations continues to increase, JN.1 has not caused a surge in hospitalizations as was seen with Omicron.

Why are cases and hospitalizations increasing? Cases are increasing because immunity from previous infections and vaccinations is decreasing, and hospitalizations are increasing due to the increased # of cases and the fact that many higher risk persons are not accessing the oral medication Paxlovid which decreases the chance of needing hospitalization.

Transition to new recommendations: In early January, as we see COVID-19, seasonal influenza, RSV, and now pertussis (whooping cough) circulating in communities this winter, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) recommends a broader approach to protect Californians from respiratory viruses than the prior COVID-19 specific guidance. As we continue to transition and incorporate our public health response to SARS-CoV-2 infection into broader activities to protect our



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communities from circulating respiratory infections, we are focused on interventions for those most at risk of severe illness, while minimizing the disruptive impact of isolation in schools and workplaces.

Here is my “executive summary”:

- For persons who test positive for COVID-19, they are still recommended to pay close attention to their symptoms. However, instead of staying home for a minimum of 5 days, they may return to work or school when they start to feel better, meaning they have not had a fever for 24 hours without the use of fever reducing medication and their symptoms are mild and improving. Masking recommendations are to wear a mask for 10 days from onset of symptoms or positive test (if no symptoms) when around others indoors.
- For persons who have been exposed to a positive case, there is no quarantine period. They are only recommended to test if they are at higher risk and would benefit from treatment, or if they are in contact with people who are at higher risk. If there are no symptoms, the time to test is within 5 days after the last exposure date and prior to contact with higher risk persons.
- Why test if you have “a cold” or “just the flu”? Although most persons will do well with a case of COVID-19, an infection with COVID-19 has the potential of being more serious than seasonal influenza, especially for persons at higher risk (the very young, elderly, and persons with chronic underlying medical conditions). You may do well – but do the right thing for those around you in your workplace, school, household, and community.
- These recommendations – and they are just that – recommendations, and not requirements – apply to the public, schools, childcare, and workplaces except healthcare facilities.
- I, as the Alpine County Health Officer, reserve the right to implement additional requirements that are stricter than this statewide guidance based on local circumstances, such as outbreaks in school or workplace settings.
- Why now with all the cases and deaths? This broader approach is similar to that for all winter respiratory infections. Since most persons will do well when infected, the focus is on protecting those most vulnerable, and minimizing the impact on schools and workplaces. However, for this to work, all of us must remember the basic recommendation to **STAY HOME WHEN YOU ARE SICK!**
- For FREE at-home tests, they are available at the Health Department in Woodfords and at the Public Safety Office in Bear Valley, during regular business hours.
- For FREE Paxlovid, call me at 530-694-2146, Option 1 for a consultation, 7 days a week.

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Immunization/ncov2019.aspx>



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