

COVID cases are ticking up in the U.S. Will Minn. have a fall, winter wave?

COVID-19 hospitalizations have increased in the Northeast and Southern U.S. through July and into August, and Minnesota's case rate is slowly increasing, too, though the overall numbers remain low

ROCHESTER — In the world's fourth summer since the COVID-19 pandemic began, cases of the respiratory illness have remained low in Minnesota for months. The winter of 2022-2023 saw increased viral activity but without the big wave of cases that marked the winters of 2020 and 2021.

Will the latter half of 2023 follow this pattern? Through July and into August, [COVID-19 hospitalizations have increased in the United States](#), particularly in the South and Northeast, and positive COVID tests in Minnesota have also been trending upward.

While there has been an increase in known cases in Minnesota, COVID infections, overall, are still "currently so low in the state that any increase, however minor, will be noticeable," said Kathy Como-Sabetti, health program senior manager for infectious disease epidemiology, prevention and control at the Minnesota Department of Health.

Per the MDH's Aug. 3 COVID update, the state's positive case rate crept up to 12.8 per 100,000 on July 23, more than double the 6.0 cases per 100,000 measured on June 11 — 2023's low point for confirmed cases. These case rates are noticeably lower than 2023's highest case rate, measured on Feb. 5: 88.3 positive tests for every 100,000 Minnesotans.

However, test positivity is no longer the most reliable indicator for COVID, said Olmsted County Public Health epidemiologist Matthew Giljork, due to the prevalence of at-home tests that don't get recorded by MDH.

"I'll use wastewater (testing), but also use hospitalization, some other indicators such as percentage of individuals going to outpatient care for influenza-like illness," he said.

Hospitalizations in Minnesota bear out [the same trend](#) as cases — through July, the number of Minnesotans in the hospital for COVID grew from an average of five patients per day to around 10. Those hospitalization numbers are still some of the lowest since the pandemic began.

As for wastewater, the [quantity of COVID-19 RNA found in Rochester's samples](#) has fluctuated throughout the summer but remains relatively low.

"To the best of my knowledge, it seems like it's still pretty low in Minnesota and in the region," Giljork said.

Other fall and winter respiratory illnesses appear to be on a more normal track this year, he said, in contrast to the unusually early, intense waves of [RSV](#) and [influenza](#) that occurred last fall.

"They typically do peak in the fall, October-November period," Giljork said. "These viruses that have been around for thousands of years are going to try and act in a similar way to what we expect."

While Giljork said it is too early to tell if Minnesota will see a significant uptick in COVID cases this fall and winter, he said he expects to see some increased COVID activity as more people spend more time inside during the colder months.

"Viral respiratory diseases can have different patterns of circulation geographically, and we could see an uptick in cases in the Midwest going into the fall," Como-Sabetti added.