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Why It Feels Like Everyone You Know Is Getting Covid-19

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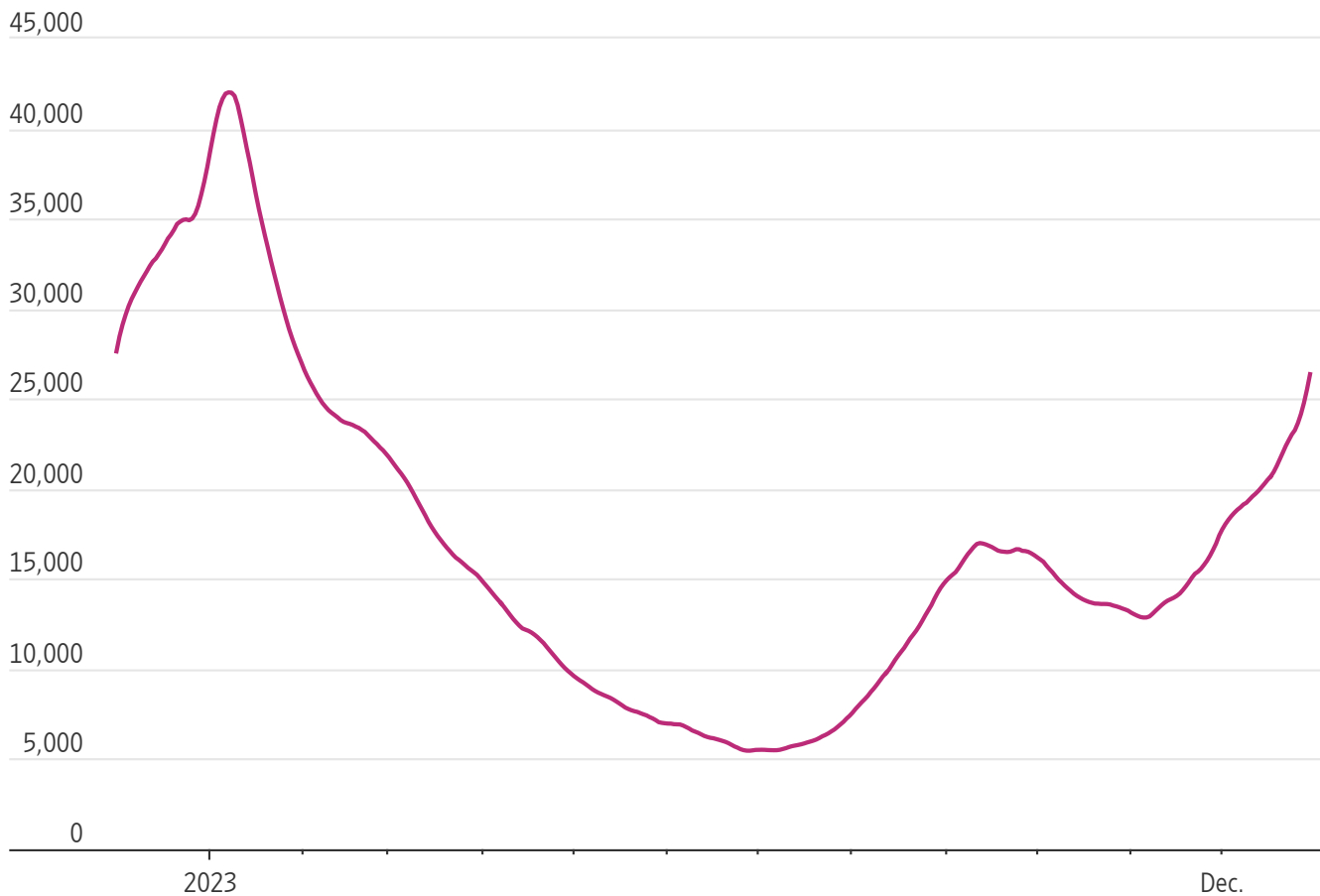
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If you are stuck at home with Covid-19 after the holidays, you are not alone.

Covid is surging again, four years after the pandemic began, as a new virus subvariant becomes dominant in the U.S. and as people gather indoors to escape cold weather.

Rising wastewater virus levels and hospitalizations underscore the latest winter Covid surge. One driver is JN.1, the latest offshoot of the virus to take over in the U.S. and an Omicron subvariant. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday estimated that JN.1 represents roughly 62% of cases nationwide.

Covid-19 hospitalizations in the U.S.



Note: Seven-day moving average

Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

The good news is measures of severe illness—hospitalizations and deaths—remain below last winter’s highs and far lower than the pandemic’s peaks. But the virus remains dangerous for some and a major nuisance for many as people return to work and school after holiday breaks.

“I think we’ll see more cases before we see less,” said Dr. Philip Landrigan, director of the Program in Global Public Health & Common Good at Boston College. “I would urge people who haven’t gotten vaccinated to get vaccinated.”

The world has seen a steady cycle of new Omicron subvariants ever since that offshoot rapidly took over more than two years ago. When new versions become dominant, it indicates that they have some advantage, whether through their ability

to evade immune defenses or easily spread from person to person.

The World Health Organization classified JN.1 as a variant of interest last month, a step below a so-called variant of concern, and said it was spreading rapidly worldwide. The WHO said that the additional global public health risk posed by JN.1 was low, but it could increase cases during a winter surge of other viral and bacterial infections.



The latest Covid vaccines produce a strong immune response against the JN.1 subvariant, preliminary research shows. PHOTO: BESS ADLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The symptoms remain familiar: coughing, fever or chills, body aches, fatigue and loss of smell or taste. The CDC has said there is no indication JN.1 causes more severe disease. Meanwhile, preliminary research shows the latest Covid vaccines produce a strong immune response against the subvariant, though only 19% of U.S. adults have gotten a shot, as of Dec. 30.

Covid cases are difficult to track due to a drop-off in testing, but wastewater data indicate virus levels have been on the rise in recent months and are at least near the highs reached last winter.

Hospitalizations are climbing, too, with a seven-day average of more than 26,000

people hospitalized with Covid in late December, about double the number two months earlier, federal data show. Some people test positive when hospitalized for other reasons, but when hospital beds fill with Covid-positive patients, it reflects how the virus is spreading in the broader community.

Still, hospitalization averages topped 40,000 last winter and 150,000 two years ago, when Omicron was first surging. The lower numbers reflect how Covid has become a lesser risk at a societal level, even as it remains a disruptive and rapidly spreading illness.

“It doesn’t compare to last year or the year prior to that, but it’s enough to make a dent on hospital beds,” said Dr. Caroline Goldzweig, chief medical officer of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Network based in Los Angeles.



Covid infections are folded into a full winter-virus landscape that includes RSV and flu, which are back in force. PHOTO: BESS ADLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Local health officials there reinstated mask requirements for healthcare staff and visitors in late December. Cedar-Sinai is requiring hospital staff and visitors to wear masks in patient areas, and patients, visitors and staff are required to wear them in its emergency departments and urgent-care clinics.

Covid deaths are also rising again, though not to prior heights. Data from death certificates show the U.S. in early December averaged more than 220 deaths a day where the virus is an underlying or contributing cause. The U.S. has seen more than 1.16 million Covid deaths in the last four years.

Covid infections are now folded into a full winter-virus landscape, with pathogens including RSV and flu back in force after being sidelined at the height of the pandemic. RSV season is in full swing, though it might be peaking in some areas. Flu is increasing in most parts of the U.S.

Some 18% of adults over 60 have gotten an RSV shot, and some 45% of adults were vaccinated against the flu this season. At least 10 million people in the U.S. have gotten the flu so far this season, according to CDC estimates, resulting in about 110,000 hospitalizations and 6,500 deaths.

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