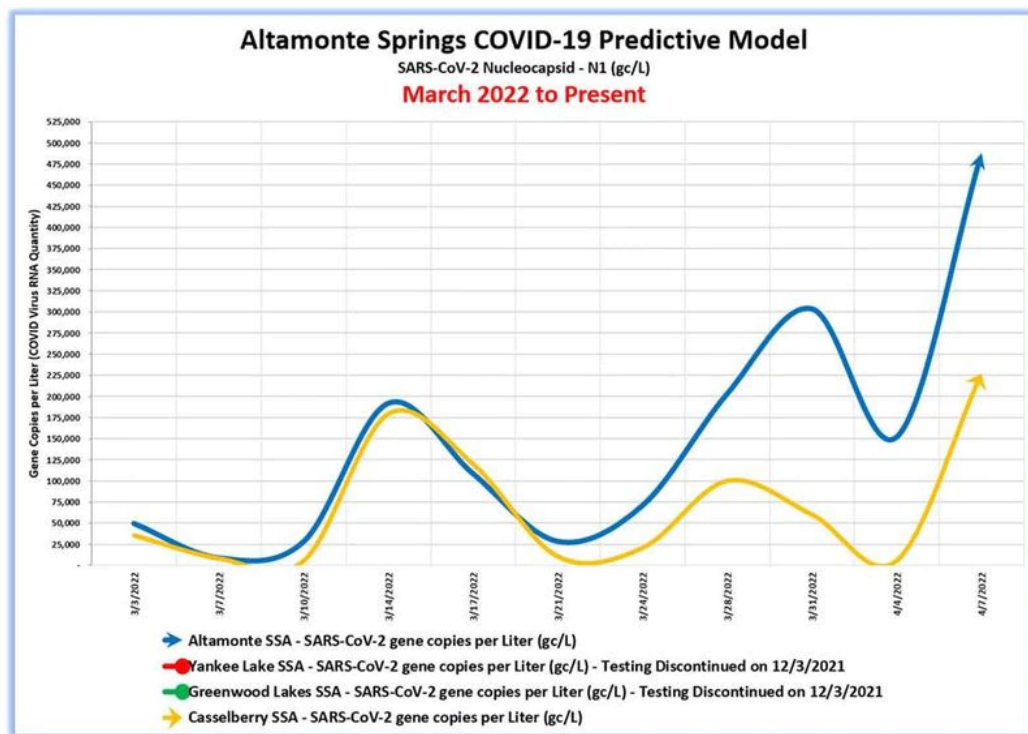


COVID-19 and BA.2 omicron variant rising in Central Florida wastewater

Caroline Catherman, Stephen Hudak : 5-7 minutes : 4/11/2022

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A graph of recent Altamonte Springs sewer service area COVID-19 concentrations. (Courtesy of Frank Martz, city manager)

After over a month of decline, COVID-19 seems to be increasing in Central Florida and across the nation.

“Altamonte Springs is seeing a substantial increase in the amount of COVID in its sewage since the beginning of March,” said Frank Martz, Altamonte Springs city manager, in an email.

The Altamonte Springs sewer service areas — covering north Orange and south Seminole counties — saw a 1,661% increase in COVID-19 virus concentration from March 10 to April 7, from 27,729 gene copies of COVID-19 per liter of wastewater — one of the lowest concentrations ever recorded — to 488,307 gene copies per liter.

Casselberry's sewer service areas saw a 4,323% increase from March 10, from 5,122 to 226,558 gene copies per liter, according to Martz.

Gene copies are fragments of the COVID-19 virus that can be found in infected or recently infected people's stool. Parts per liter were in the [tens of millions](#) during the height of the winter surge.

As of April 7, all three of Orange County's wastewater service areas saw an increase over the last month, if only temporary, said Sarah Lux, spokesperson for Orange County Utilities.



"The Eastern Water Reclamation Facility, which reported the largest uptick of gene copies per liter, is highly residential and includes the University of Central Florida," she said. "We may be seeing a temporary increase of COVID-19 in our wastewater due to Spring Break and other summer activities."

Omicron — a more-infectious variant of COVID-19 that propelled December to February's [record-breaking](#) surge — was the only variant detected. It has dominated the country since December.

An even [more infectious but equally severe](#) type of the COVID-19 omicron variant, known as BA.2, is responsible for the majority of COVID-19 cases detected from wastewater in the Altamonte Springs sewer service area: about 70%; and Casselberry sewer service area: 90%.

Florida is among 26 states and Washington, D.C. that have seen an increase in COVID-19 cases over the last two weeks, according to Department of Health and Human Services data collected by [the New York Times](#).

Florida's cases have increased by 34%; its daily average is 1,670 new cases as of Monday. Philadelphia [reinstated an indoor mask mandate](#) to prevent a rise in cases and hospitalizations. Prominent D.C. officials including two Cabinet members, two members of Congress and a top aide to Vice President Kamala Harris have tested positive recently, [according to the Washington Post](#).

Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical advisor to the President, said in an [interview with Bloomberg News](#) April 6 that the increase in COVID-19 cases nationwide is not surprising given the recent relaxation of masking and other community safety measures following the winter omicron surge, as well as the rising concentration of BA.2 and a [waning in immunity](#) against reinfection from infections and vaccinations.

As of Friday, 15,474,298 Florida residents over 5 have had at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"I would not be surprised if we see an uptick in cases. Whether that uptick becomes a surge, whether there are a lot more cases, is difficult to predict," Fauci said.

Effectiveness against infection from COVID-19 seems to wane significantly several months after catching the illness or getting a vaccine.

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However, a [recent CDC study](#) suggested that vaccine effectiveness against severe outcomes during the omicron wave in January was 88% with two shots and 94% with three. Fauci said he hopes hospitalizations will not rise alongside cases.

Hospitalizations have been emphasized by Fauci and the CDC in recent months as a better metric for assessing COVID-19 than cases. In late February, the CDC revised the way it measures community risks to focus more on hospitalizations.

According to the CDC's new criteria, every county in Florida is green, signifying low transmission of COVID in the community.

According to the CDC's old criteria, many Florida counties including Orange would be classified as "moderate" transmission, University of South Florida epidemiologist Jason Salemi pointed out on Twitter Friday, which would necessitate measures such as mask-wearing.

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