

NEWS

Reported COVID-19 cases, deaths in Collier County in December near pandemic highs

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The number of COVID-19 cases and deaths reported in Collier County continued their upward climb in December, approaching monthly records established during the height of the summer surge.

According to a Naples Daily News analysis of data compiled by the state Department of Health, Collier reported 4,749 COVID-19 cases last month, about 28% more than the 3,170 confirmed in November. It was the county's second-highest monthly case total since the coronavirus pandemic began, trailing only the 5,356 reported in July.

Reported coronavirus-related deaths of Collier residents also spiked in December. Last month, 52 deaths were attributed to COVID-19, more than double the 24 reported in November, and just two shy of the monthly high of 54 set in July.

The rise in reported deaths during December followed a sharp increase in COVID-19 hospitalizations in November, according to data from the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration.

The 119 new hospitalizations reported by the ACHA in Collier during November was the highest monthly total since August (187). The seven-day current hospitalization average more than doubled during the month, from an average of 41 patients on Nov. 1 to 88 on Nov. 30.

Dr. Jason Salemi, associate professor of epidemiology at the University of South Florida College of Public Health, has been tracking the relationship between hospitalizations and deaths since Florida began reporting daily COVID hospitalizations in July. He said an increase in the seven-day average hospitalization rate has been a good predictor of a subsequent rise in deaths five to seven days later.

"But knowing just how many deaths will follow is the challenge," he said.

That's because only about half of the COVID-19 deaths reported by the state Department of Health on a given day include people who have died within the previous two weeks. The rest includes dates of deaths from two weeks to as much as two months prior. The state does not report dates of death on a county-level because of medical privacy concerns.

"We won't know the full picture but we'll know enough about the picture to know what's going on usually within four weeks," Salemi said.

In December, the state reported 143 new COVID-19 hospitalizations in Collier County, 20% greater than November's total. However, the seven-day hospitalization average was 77 on Dec. 31, about 14% lower than the average on Nov. 30 (88)

Testing for COVID-19 in Collier rose for the third consecutive month in December. The 22,817 tests processed for the county last month were up nearly 40% from November, surpassing the 28% jump in monthly cases. That means greater testing was responsible for some of the case increase in Collier last month.

The county's seven-day average for new cases rose 49% during December, from 118 on Dec. 1 to 176 on Dec. 31.

Florida also set a COVID-19 case record in December, eclipsing July's previous high by more than 6,000 cases. Statewide, there were nearly 324,000 new cases reported last month, about 65% more than the nearly 197,000 added in November.

Nationally, the picture was also bleak. According to The COVID Tracking Project:

- The U.S. reported more than 6.36 million coronavirus cases in December, passing November's record by 1.9 million. And November had double the cases of any previous month of the pandemic.
- The U.S. surpassed 240,000 new cases for the first time on Dec. 17.
- On Dec. 30, the nation surpassed 125,000 current hospitalizations for the first time during the pandemic.
- The nation also reported a pandemic-high 77,572 deaths in December.

According to state Department of Health data, Collier averaged 153 COVID-19 cases per day in December, up from an average of 106 in November. The surge was steeper in the final six days of December with 1,078 new cases reported, an average of about 180 per day.

The leap in COVID-19 cases was also evident in Collier's seven-day average positivity rate, which increased nearly 2 percentage points in December. The rate, which is the average of a day and the previous six days of cases divided by tests, rose from 10.41% on Dec. 1 to 12.39% on Dec. 31.

Through December, 332 Collier residents have died of COVID-19, according to the state health department. About 31% of those total deaths, or 102 of them, were reported in July and August.

Statewide, COVID-19 deaths showed a month-to-month increase for the first time since August with 3,076 reported during December. That was about 68% greater than the 1,836 verified in November.

On Dec. 14, health care workers across the nation started receiving the first COVID-19 vaccines administered in the U.S., the first small step in stemming the virus' spread. Both nationwide and in Southwest Florida, the vaccine rollout has been plagued by supply shortages and logistical difficulties.

On Dec. 23, Gov. Ron DeSantis issued an executive order that allowed seniors 65 and older to receive COVID-19 vaccinations ahead of essential workers.

“We are not going to put young healthy workers ahead of our elderly,” DeSantis said.

The order left medical systems and counties scrambling to create distribution systems for groups they hadn't expected to vaccinate for at least a week or two.

In Lee County, images of hundreds of seniors lined up the night before the first vaccines were distributed on a first-come, first-serve basis starting Dec. 28 became a national flashpoint of the nation's shaky start to the COVID-19 vaccination process.

In Collier, the distribution program of 500 vaccinations started Sunday and runs for six days with advance appointments that had to be made online. Those appointments were snapped up quickly within hours last week when announced. The mostly-drive-up process has run smoothly, except for long waits of up to two hours, even with the appointment.

Growth of COVID-19 in Collier County

Total cases reported

March 31: 146
April 30: 596
May 31: 1,539
June 30: 4,225
July 31: 9,581
Aug. 31: 11,606
Sept. 30: 12,751
Oct. 31: 14,587
Nov. 30: 17,757
Dec. 31: 22,506

Total deaths reported

March 31: 1
April 30: 19
May 31: 49
June 30: 74
July 31: 122
Aug. 31: 176
Sept. 30: 221
Oct. 31: 256
Nov. 30: 280
Dec. 31: 332

Total hospitalizations reported

March 31: N/A
April 30: N/A
May 31: 202
June 30: 323
July 31: 654
Aug. 31: 841
Sept. 30: 910
Oct. 31: 998
Nov. 30: 1,117
Dec. 31: 1,260

March 31: 1,356
April 30: 5,497
May 31: 16,770
June 30: 33,777
July 31: 58,570
Aug. 31: 70,313
Sept. 30: 79,676
Oct. 31: 93,250
Nov. 30: 109,592
Dec. 31: 132,409

Cumulative percent of people testing positive

March 31: 10.77%
April 30: 10.84%
May 31: 9.18%
June 30: 12.51%
July 31: 16.36%
Aug. 31: 16.51%
Sept. 30: 16%
Oct. 31: 15.64%
Nov. 30: 16.2%
Dec. 31: 17%

Source: Florida Department of Health