

As Florida's tourism rebounds, CDC fears a travel-fueled COVID-19 surge

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Governor Ron DeSantis says he will take executive action to prohibit “vaccination passports” in Florida.

Florida's COVID-19 cases are rising again as air traffic reaches numbers not seen in more than a year, sparking concerns that the nation's wide-open Southern vacation playground could help fuel a fourth surge of infections.

The White House and Centers for Disease Control Prevention called for vigilance on Monday, describing a feeling of “impending doom” with an alarming new uptick in cases nationwide and increased spring break travel.

Meanwhile, Gov. Ron DeSantis continued on his course of fully reopening the state's tourism sector and downplayed the federal government's concerns.

“When you start talking about doom, what you are saying is the vaccines must not work,” DeSantis said during a news conference in Tallahassee.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky pleaded for pandemic-weary Americans to keep their guard up and refrain from nonessential travel, saying she was feeling “impending doom” as cases rise. “Right now, I'm scared,” she said, adding “When we see that uptick in cases, what we have seen before is things really have a tendency to surge and surge big.”

President Joe Biden called on governors and local officials to reinstate mask mandates that had been lifted. Florida has never had a statewide mask requirement.

Cases of the virus are up about 10% nationwide over the past week from the previous week, to about 60,000 cases per day, with both hospitalizations and deaths ticking up as well, Walensky said.

The average number of new cases per day in Florida is on the rise again, too, increasing 15% from the previous two weeks and ending a downward streak that began in January. The share of positive tests has also hit a two-week high, state data shows, even as millions have gotten vaccine doses.

Florida has more documented variant cases than any other state in the country, most of which are the highly contagious B.1.1.7 strain from the United Kingdom, according to the CDC.

Instead of highlighting rising cases, DeSantis is [**demanding the CDC let Florida-based cruise ships sail again**](#) and threatening to file legal action if the federal government doesn't move more quickly. He vowed Monday to [**ban businesses from requiring tourists show "vaccine passports"**](#) to prove they have been immunized.

DeSantis has encouraged Floridians to get vaccinated, but he has said he does not think the shot should be mandatory.

As the vaccine lifts spirits and offers hope, Americans are flying in numbers not seen in over a year, and many are bound for Florida's beaches and theme parks. The Transportation Security Administration [**screened nearly 1.6 million airline passengers on Sunday**](#), a record high during the pandemic.

That number is up significantly from a year ago when about 180,000 travelers were screened but well below the 2.5 million screenings on that date in 2019.

In Florida, rowdy and unmasked spring breakers have inundated South Beach, leading local officials to impose an 8 p.m. curfew to help control the crowds. Volusia County welcomed throngs of bikers for its annual Bike Week motorcycle rally.



Bikers crowd Main Street during Bike Week in Daytona Beach on March 8, 2021. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel) (Stephen M. Dowell)

Florida's vaccination effort could help to prevent hospitalizations and deaths even if cases surge again with 73% of residents 65 and older having gotten at least one dose. But still, much of the population remains unprotected. Only about 15% of Florida's residents have been fully vaccinated against the virus.

Florida opened the shot to those 40 and older on Monday. All adults 18 and up in Florida will be eligible starting on April 5.

Jay Wolfson, a public health professor at the University of South Florida, said younger people who are driving the increase aren't immune from suffering health consequences known as long-haul syndrome.

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"Even if people don't die and don't go to hospital, this disease can leave a gift for people even if they are asymptomatic, and some may experience long-term chronic conditions," he said.

Caution is still needed even as spirits are lifted by the vaccine effort, said Dr. Olveen Carrasquillo, chief of general internal medicine at the University of Miami Health System,

“I am not going to say doom and gloom yet, but when I see that uptick it does worry me and scare me,” he said. “This is not the time to celebrate.”

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