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New record lows for California COVID hospitalizations. Will it stick?

In June there was an average of 950 hospitalized COVID patients, just 4% of the peak in January 2021

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When Dr. Errol Ozdalga finished a recent 14-day stretch of working on the general medicine floor at Stanford Hospital, he realized what was no longer plaguing California's hospitals.

"I can't remember the last time I saw someone purely admitted for COVID," said Ozdalga, a clinical associate professor of medicine at Stanford, who had only one patient in those two weeks with the virus that once overwhelmed every facet of the health care system.

It's not just Ozdalga seeing less COVID. The number of patients with the virus at California hospitals reached a new low this month since the start of the pandemic, with just 611 reported on July 2.

Statewide, before this summer the previous low was 1,170 people hospitalized with COVID in June 2021. Now, totals have been less than that since early June.

Compare that to early January 2021, during the first winter surge of the pandemic, when people hospitalized with the virus reached a peak of more than 22,000 patients in Golden State hospitals. That was before vaccinations were widely available and before the virus lost some of its deadly edge. The number has dropped more than 95% since then.

The second year's winter surge wasn't as bad, with a high of just over 16,000 Californians hospitalized with COVID in January 2022. And this winter's peak was just a fraction of that, reaching over 5,000 for a short while in December 2022 and January 2023.

While COVID precautions have disappeared along with much of the public's concern, the virus is not gone. Dr. Bob Wachter, Chin-Hong's colleague at UCSF, announced on Twitter this week that his "luck ran out" and he had finally caught the virus. He described [an ordeal that landed him in the hospital's emergency department](#) with his first COVID infection after he passed out in the shower and hit his head in the fall.

"My case is a cautionary tale, particularly for the 'just a cold' folks," tweeted Wachter, the chair of UCSF medical department. "Mine definitely was not. ... I literally have scars to show for it."

Wachter's experience highlights one of the oddities of COVID hospital data, the fact that there is no distinction between those who are hospitalized for complications from the virus from those who are hospitalized for other reasons and happen to test positive for the virus. Wachter, for example, was hospitalized because of the injuries he sustained after fainting while suffering from an otherwise mild COVID infection.

Wachter said he had received the most recent bivalent vaccine — designed to protect against both the original and more recent variants — in April, but its protection against infection wanes after two to three months. For many, their most recent booster was more than a year ago, but this fall will bring a new chance for boosting immunity.

expects, when the first of what is expected to become an annual COVID vaccine will be available, with a public health approach similar to the flu vaccine.

Despite the new record low hospitalizations, there are still many vulnerable people Chin-Hong warns. "Most people don't think of it as a big deal, but it is for some people," he said, like the families of the six Californians dying from the virus each day, still.

More than 500 Californians were dying each day at the height of our deadliest surge in the first winter of the pandemic. The recent plunge in COVID patients is striking to doctors and nurses who were so overwhelmed for much of the past three years.

"The stress level is so much better," Ozdalga said of walking into the hospital. "It's amazing how it feels like just yesterday, it was such a different world."

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