Mira Irons, MD, takes a look at the surge in cases across the country and Europe

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Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 update, AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger and AMA Chief Health and Science Officer Mira Irons, MD, talk about COVID-19 numbers, trending topics and the recent surge in COVID-19 cases across the country and Europe.

Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center.

Speakers

- Mira Irons, MD, chief health and science officer, AMA

Transcript

**Unger:** Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today, we're taking our weekly look at the numbers, trends and the latest news about COVID-19 with AMA's Chief Health and Science Officer Dr. Mira Irons in Chicago. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer also in Chicago. Dr. Irons, a torrent of bad news. Let's start by reviewing this week's numbers. What's happening across the country with new cases and deaths?

**Dr. Irons:** Todd, you're absolutely right, the news just keeps getting worse and worse. Current numbers as of this morning, 8,705,127 people have been diagnosed with COVID, and 225,739 people have died from the condition. Globally, more than 43 million people have been diagnosed, more than 1.16 million people have died, and the numbers just keep going up. If you look at the numbers, more than 85,000 new coronavirus cases were reported across the United States on Friday, breaking the single day record set in July. On Saturday, we saw more than 78,000 cases, the second highest in a
single day.

**Dr. Irons:** If you look at the average over the last seven-day period, it's over 70,000 cases. Hospitalizations are up 40% across the country. Some people might say, "Well, the numbers of cases are up because we're testing more people." Part of that is probably true, but hospitalizations are also increasing, and that's significant because we know we're just not testing asymptomatic people. The deaths, the average deaths have stayed around 775,000 over the last week, so that seems to be less than it was when we go back to the spring and the early summer, but we know that that follows, that usually follows hospitalizations. It's still early days, and it's still a significant problem.

**Unger:** I know when we were talking earlier, you said you were looking at a heat map of COVID cases across the country, and it's just all very hot, but we are seeing some hotspots across the Midwest to upper Midwest. What else are we seeing?

**Dr. Irons:** As you said, and the difference now, and I think this translates to the large numbers that we're seeing, is that when we go back to the spring, COVID, the surges were traveling around the country, so there was a lot centered in California and on the west coast and then went over to New York and then it went to the south, but now the country is pretty much all red. We see there aren't pockets of disease anymore. We're actually seeing infection across pretty much all of the country. A lot of it, as you said, is really centered in the upper Midwest and the north part. North and South Dakota are getting hit really badly. I heard this morning, New Mexico has the highest numbers they've had. Utah's running out of ICU beds. Minnesota, I heard today, their hospitalizations have increased significantly. We're seeing that predominance in the middle of the country and north, but it's everywhere.

**Unger:** Unfortunately, even in our state of Illinois, which I'm hoping gets under control because I don't want to return to cutting my own hair. One place that is also seeing surprising numbers, of course, is Europe. This is a set of countries that seem to have gotten the pandemic under control, but now we're seeing quite a different story. What's happening there?

**Dr. Irons:** Significantly increased numbers in Italy, in France. Other countries like Belgium and Poland are seeing increases also. A lot of protests are happening in Europe because the countries are starting to impose restrictions. Italy was especially hard hit. When we think back to how horrible the situation was in Italy in the spring, they were very hard hit.

They do have a public mask law that the majority of people have complied with, but what they ended up doing was opening up the country. A lot of the European countries started to open up in the spring and the summer, and people took vacations. With the fall and the arrival of cold weather, this is what we've been warned about. We're seeing a lot of restrictions being imposed.
Unger: You mentioned before, we're certainly seeing the number of cases and hospitalizations running ahead of, of course, whatever increases in testing there are. Any other key drivers we want to talk about?

Dr. Irons: I think that the cold weather is always a key driver as people are going inside and adding people to their bubble and spending more time inside, you're going to have an increased risk for transmission. I think, also, colleges, we're continuing to see spreads in colleges. The University of Michigan imposed a stay on campus or stay in your dorm order for students recently because about 60% of the cases in Ann Arbor were coming from students. They're not seeing the spread in dining halls and in the dorms. It's when students go outside and start congregating together without masks and in close contact that they're seeing that spread.

Unger: Continued discussions about masks. Why don't we talk a little bit about the news on masks?

Dr. Irons: For whatever reason, it continues to be a debatable topic. We know that masks help. We know that masks help decrease transmission and also help protect people. But there are still states, we don't have a national mask mandate. Some towns and states have recommended masks in public, but there are states like Iowa that are not requiring masks and say it should really be up to people individually. The virus has a mind of its own, but we do have control over our behavior, and we know how to protect ourselves, and we know how to protect each other. Masks are really an important piece of trying to mitigate, especially at this time of increased spread in the fall. It's the one thing we can do to make things better.

Unger: In addition to masks, of course, physical distancing. We saw some news from the CDC about their redefinition of close contact. Do you want to speak to that?

Dr. Irons: Yeah. The definition, going back early on in the pandemic, of close contact is spending at least 15 minutes with someone who has been diagnosed with COVID. That definition was changed last week to a total of 15 minutes over a 24 hour period, so that you don't have to be sitting with someone for 15 minutes, but if you have been in the same environment with a person who has COVID for 15 minutes or more over a 24 hour period, you're at increased risk of getting the condition and spreading it. It kind of makes sense, especially now that we're spending a lot of time indoors with people because it is going to be, especially in a non-ventilated environment, it still may be in the air.

Unger: Any other news or major points from the AMA we'd like folks to hear this week?

Dr. Irons: Two press releases from the AMA. Last Wednesday, there was a press release on the Justice Department settlement with Purdue Pharma. The AMA recommends that any settlement or judgment stemming from opioid related litigation be used exclusively for data collection, research, education, overdose prevention, stigma elimination, and evidence-based treatment for substance use disorders and pain.
There was also a press release last Thursday. It was a multimedia release actually in English and Spanish examining the Latinx community's disproportionate vulnerability to COVID-19 in recognition of Hispanic Heritage Month. We've seen the disproportionate impact of COVID on the Hispanic population and the African American population and just have to keep reinforcing individual behavior. Wear a mask, socially distance, wash your hands. We will get through this, but it's going to be a long few months.

**Unger:** Well, thank you. One more thing I just wanted to bring up. Another statement from the AMA over the weekend regarding the question mark around whether physicians were "inflating the numbers" of COVID-19 patients. I thought it'd be important if I just read from that statement directly.

"At a time when physicians and other health care professionals are providing care to a record number of COVID-19 patients, it's the third wave, there is misinformation about how patients are counted. Let’s be clear, physicians are not inflating the number of COVID patients."

For that complete statement, you can check out our feed on Twitter.

That's it for today’s COVID-19 update. Thank you, Dr. Irons, for being here and sharing the latest news and your perspective. For additional information on COVID 19, visit the AMA site, ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for being with us here today, and please take care.

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