

Greece's COVID surge in holiday season fuels global spread

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Hospitals across Greece are being swamped with rising hospital admissions of COVID-19 patients. According to the latest weekly figures—released on July 25 for the week beginning July 15—there were 788 admissions compared to an average of 551 over the previous four weeks. The number admitted to hospital for the week beginning July 15 was over 2.5 times higher than the same week last year.

Deaths from COVID have been steadily increasing with the latest report recording 35 new fatalities, up from the average of 23 over the previous four weeks and twice as many as the same time last year.

Speaking to the Athens New Agency's radio station on July 20 Garyfallia Poulakou, an infectious disease specialist at the Sotiria Hospital in Athens, estimated that nearly every household in Greece has got at least one person ill with COVID. She stated, "We don't know if [the wave] has peaked yet. My sense is that more or less the same intensity will be seen during the next month as well."

The rise in cases is part of the wider COVID wave raging across the globe driven by the latest variants of SARS-CoV-2—the FliRT subvariants of Omicron, KP.3 and KP.2—which based on official data have been the dominant strains in Greece since the middle of April.

Tourism is a big factor in the spread of the current wave. According to the wastewater data collected over the past few weeks from urban areas, cities which have seen the sharpest rises are those most closely associated with tourism. The biggest weekly rise since the start of June was recorded in the city of Chania on the island of Crete. In the week beginning June 17 Chania saw a 204 percent rise of the viral load compared with the previous week.

Talking about the situation at Athens' Sotiria Hospital Poulakou confirmed that COVID wards are struggling to cope with increased admissions, after capacity was reduced to a minimum during recent months. She added

that "gradually all clinics [within the hospital] are having to admit COVID cases as well in some of their wards, in order to keep up with increasing demand."

This will inevitably increase the spread of the disease, which will only intensify the pressure on hospitals.

This was underscored by a press release by the local union of hospital workers at the Kilkis General Hospital in Northern Greece which stated that after the COVID-19 department was shut down in April this year, COVID patients are being hospitalised at the severely understaffed General Pathology Clinic: "Since the beginning of July 12 patients have been admitted [with COVID] seven of whom are still hospitalised. After COVID spread to a nurse as well as patients already ill with other diseases, three patients unfortunately died."

Metaxas Cancer Hospital in Piraeus introduced mask mandates and compulsory testing on July 15 in response to the rise in cases. Speaking to state broadcaster ERT, the hospital's director Sarantos Efstathopoulos said the measures were brought in following an "upward trend" in the proportion of cases noted among staff and patients.

Asked why these additional measures have not been extended to other big hospitals in the wider Attica region (population over 3.8 million) Efstathopoulos replied, "People should remember that for many months now the implementation of measures is not compulsory not just in Greece but in the whole of Europe. Each hospital can decide on its own the strictness of the measures it takes", adding that that cancer patient at the Metaxas hospital are "more clinically vulnerable to all infections not just COVID."

This fragmented approach exposes the complete breakdown of public health measures to curb the spread of the COVID virus. The mandate at Metaxas is subject to review on July 29 and will no doubt be lifted once cases are deemed to be at an "acceptable" level. In April, as the COVID winter wave retreated, all limited measures

within healthcare settings were lifted while in March last year all COVID specific ICUs were scrapped.

Greece's public healthcare system is especially vulnerable to the devastation wrought by the virus because of the brutal austerity imposed by successive conservative, social-democratic and Syriza governments at the behest of the European Union and International Monetary Fund over the previous decade.

A study published in 2022 by Greece's Institute of Political Economic & Social Research stated that between 2009 and 2019 Greece was "associated with the largest reduction in total health spending (-22.8 percent) among all European countries". Healthcare spending fell from 9.4 percent of GDP in 2009—a year before the first austerity package was signed—to 7.8 percent of GDP in 2019. Greece saw the sharpest rise of unmet healthcare needs in Europe from 9.4 percent in 2004 to 27.8 percent in 2020.

(The X posting notes of photos this month from Attikon hospital that it shows beds stacked close to each other and PPE being used as bedding)

The conservative New Democracy (ND) government has not made a statement even acknowledging the existence of the wave. Behind this are calculations that nothing must cut across the mega profits reaped by Greece's tourist industry, not least given some articles in the travel sections of foreign media outlets have warned of the rise in cases. According to a study, "The Contribution of Tourism to the Greek Economy in 2023," by the Institute of the Hellenic Tourism Business Association (INSETE), the tourist sector amounts to a third of Greece's GDP and is estimated to be worth between 62.8 billion and 75.6 billion euros. Current Health Minister Adonis Georgiadis, as Development and Investment Minister in 2023 during the Delta variant summer wave, argued against any public health measures stating that "without tourism there is no money".

Much of the media takes the stand of Britain's *Daily Mail* in rejecting any danger posed by mass tourism from the UK to Greece every year. Last week in a piece headlined, "Do you really need to cancel your Greek holiday after 'Covid spike' and a return of mask mandates - after just 205 extra cases?", deputy health editor John Ely wrote that there was no problem going to Greece on the basis that there were "205 extra hospital admissions for the nation of over 10 million people." At any rate, wrote Ely, "the Mediterranean nation is currently faring better than Britain, official Covid data suggests." He noted, "The latest weekly data from the UK

Health Security Agency recorded 2,797 patients admitted to hospital in the week of June 28th, the most recent data available. While not directly comparable, this is four times the number of Covid admissions in the Greek report.

"Britain also recorded 163 deaths where Covid was mentioned on a death certificate as of July 5, again the latest data available. This is, while again not comparable, six times greater than the number of deaths recorded in Greece."

The job of providing a scientific veneer to the Greek government's herd immunity agenda fell to Gkikas Magiorkinis, epidemiologist and member of the Health Ministry's scientific committee. In an interview in *Apogevmatini's* July 14 edition Magiorkinis stated, "I don't think the dynamic any longer exists for the reintroduction of compulsory protective measures."

In a July 21 interview with ERT, Matina Pagoni, president of the Union of Hospital Doctors in Athens and Piraeus (EINAP) and member of the ruling New Democracy, she conceded the severity of the current wave while only advising people to test before going on holiday. The union bureaucrat then downplayed the severity of the FliRT variants stating they led to "two to three days fever and then you recover."

This discounts the fact that Long COVID can be contracted from a mild infection with the risk increasing with every re-infection. A study carried out by Long COVID Greece based on 208 Long COVID patients found that 68.8 percent were not hospitalised. The study exposed the lack of adequate treatment for Long COVID patients. More than half (53.4 percent) state that they don't have the right treatment, while nearly one in two have spent up to €500 in doctors' fees and nearly one in three more than that.



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