

Health

The Seattle Times

Why are Washington state's coronavirus cases on the rise again?

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Visitors to Golden Gardens Park kept their distance from one another on this day in May, although no one was wearing a mask. As counties reopen in... (Greg Gilbert / The Seattle Times)

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By [Ryan Blethen](#) 

Seattle Times staff reporter

Nearly every county in Washington is in some stage of reopening from coronavirus-related shutdowns, offering some measure of hope we might be through the worst of it. But new infections have been climbing statewide — up 20% since Memorial Day.

What's behind the recent increase? It depends on where you look.

While cases are generally plateauing in the Puget Sound region, some other areas are seeing spikes, which has driven the statewide count to 24,779 confirmed cases as of 11:59 p.m. Wednesday.

“We believe this is due at least in part to pockets of activity where there are localized

outbreaks,” said Lisa Stromme Warren, a Department of Health (DOH) spokesperson. “We’re trying to determine to what extent it is localized outbreaks and to what extent it is broader community transmission.”

The state’s most populous counties — King, Pierce and Snohomish — have seen new cases of COVID-19 begin to level off, while the number of infected people is growing in Southwest and Eastern Washington.

Since Memorial Day, King County has had an 8% increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, Snohomish County 5% and Pierce County bumped up 10%.

The increase in case counts is much more dramatic in Eastern Washington, with a 49% jump since Memorial Day in Spokane County, 39% in Benton County and 61% in Yakima County. Southwest Washington’s largest county, Clark, saw a 39% increase in cases during the same time period.

During the same time period, the number of deaths mostly grew at a slower rate than confirmed cases of COVID-19. The state’s data is incomplete after June 3, but it shows an 8% increase in the number of deaths since Memorial Day, with the largest increase among the state’s bigger counties being in Yakima County, which had a 22% increase. King County’s death toll from COVID-19 grew by 5% since Memorial Day.

More on the coronavirus outbreak

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Spokane, Clark, Pierce and Snohomish counties are in Phase 2 of reopening and Benton and Yakima counties are in Phase 1. King County has moved into a modified Phase 1.5, but could apply for Phase 2 next week, said Public Health — Seattle & King County director Patty Hayes at Wednesday's King County Health Board meeting.

The rise in cases in Clark County is mostly due to workplace outbreaks at Firestone Pacific Foods and Pacific Crest Building Supply, and the testing of all employees at the two businesses, said Marissa Armstrong, a spokesperson with Clark County Public Health.

The hottest spot in the state for new COVID-19 cases is Yakima County, where the huge increase is also largely attributed to workplace outbreaks in agricultural businesses and in long-term care facilities.

The rapidly growing outbreak was worrisome enough that late last month the state Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sent a "strike team" to support public health efforts in Yakima County.

The team found the large outbreaks in food-processing and packing plants and in 11 long-term care facilities in the county.

Cases of the new coronavirus are spiking in a number of states that eased or lifted stay-home orders in mid-May. Arizona is emblematic of the situation facing many of these states. The state's governor lifted the stay-at-home order on May 15. About two weeks later, about the maximum time the virus incubates, Arizona's health care system is at the brink as the number of COVID-19 cases quickly rises.

It isn't yet clear how reopening in Washington state is affecting the virus' spread, said Stromme Warren.

The other unknown is how many people packed in at the protests will contract COVID-19. It might be difficult to determine how much the protests play into an increased case count because the state is beginning to reopen at the same time, said Dr. Jared Baeten, vice dean of the University of Washington's School of Public Health.

“If we see spikes, which we will,” Baeten told The Seattle Times last week, “it is not solely because of the protests.”

While outbreaks intensify across the Cascade Mountains, the situation is stabilizing in the Puget Sound region, which was dealing with the virus earlier than in Eastern Washington.

Because SARS-CoV-2 is a new virus, there were limited options to keep people safe, but the things that could be done like social distancing, wearing masks and hand-washing have helped slow the spread of the virus in King County, Dr. Jeffrey Duchin, public health officer for Public Health — Seattle & King County said during the health board meeting.

“The reason we’ve gotten to the relatively good place we’re at is because of the tremendous community effort that was based entirely on what we know on how this virus spreads and the few available options we have to prevent infection,” Duchin said.

Information from the Yakima Herald-Republic and The Washington Post is included in this report.

Coronavirus resources

- [New CDC guidance: Virus "doesn't spread easily" from surfaces](#)
 - [Tips for staying safe as we begin to go out more](#)
 - [How to properly wear a face mask to slow spread of coronavirus](#)
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