

Record number of parents miss work as respiratory illnesses spike in kids

Though there are signs things could get worse, the White House has a rosy outlook.

Beth Mole - Nov 16, 2022 11:34 pm UTC



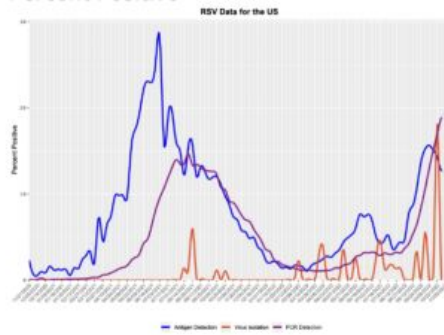
[Enlarge](#) / Parents work on their computers while their son entertains himself at their home in Boston in April 2020.

[Getty](#) | [Boston Globe](#)

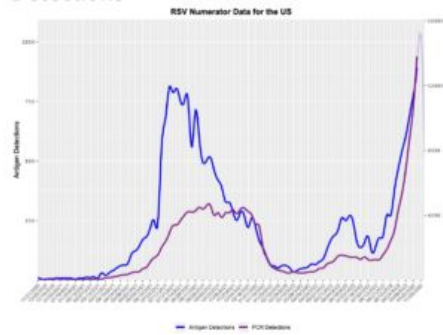
Respiratory illnesses are raging this fall, slamming children particularly hard. Cases of influenza-like illnesses are off to a startlingly strong and early start this season. RSV—respiratory syncytial (sin-SISH-uhl) virus—continues to skyrocket. A stew of SARS-CoV-2 variants is still simmering in the background. And the rabble of usual cold-season viruses, such as rhinoviruses and enteroviruses, is also making the rounds.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

Percent Positive



Detections

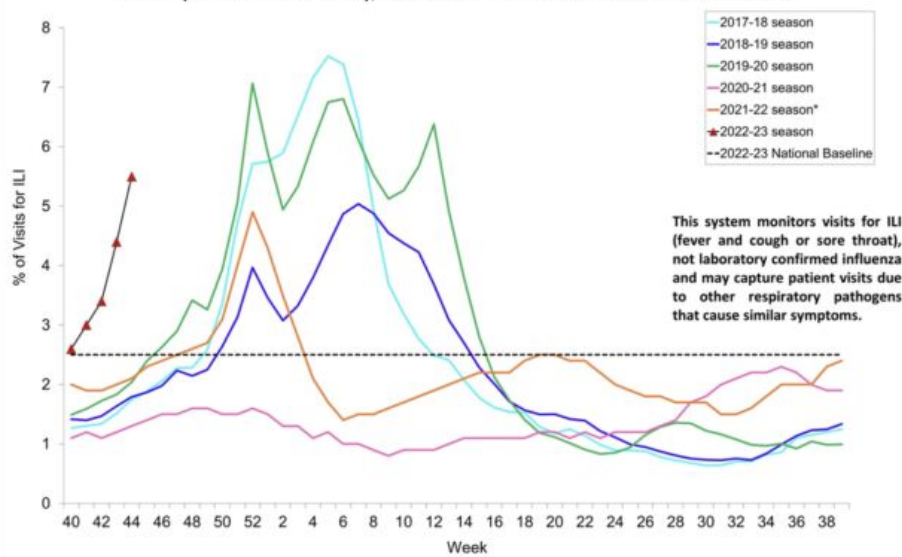


[Enlarge](#) / RSV national trends.

[CDC](#)

With the surge in infections, children's hospitals around the country have reported being at capacity or overwhelmed, as *Ars* has reported before. But another effect of the crush of viruses is a squeeze on the workforce. As *The Washington Post* first reported Tuesday, the US broke its record last month for people missing work due to childcare problems—such as having children home sick and childcare facilities or schools shuttered due to staffing shortages and sickness.

Percentage of Outpatient Visits for Respiratory Illness Reported By The U.S. Outpatient Influenza-like Illness Surveillance Network (ILINet), Weekly National Summary, 2022-2023* and Selected Previous Seasons



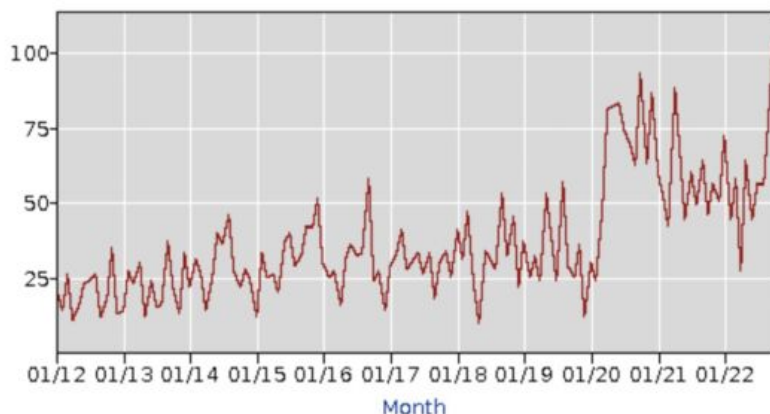
[Enlarge](#) / Outpatient respiratory illness visits.

[CDC](#)

In October, more than 100,000 employed Americans missed work for childcare-related problems, according to data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. That is more missing workers than in any other month in recent records, including the entirety of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many childcare facilities and schools closed down for extended periods. At the height of pandemic-related shutdowns in 2020, the number of Americans missing work for childcare problems only reached the low 90,000s.

Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey

Series Id: LNU02096055
Not Seasonally Adjusted
Series title: (Unadj) Employed - With a job, not at work, Childcare problems
Labor force status: Employed
Type of data: Number in thousands
Age: 16 years and over
Reasons with job not at work: Childcare problems
Worker status/schedules: With a job not at work



[Enlarge](#) / Labor Force Statistics showing workers missing work for childcare problems.

[US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

The labor statistics are another reminder of the massive impact transmission of respiratory viruses continues to have on Americans. Like SARS-CoV-2, the transmission of RSV, flu, and other seasonal viruses can be reduced by simple health measures like mask-wearing, avoiding crowds, staying home when sick, and hygiene measures. But, the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have backed off from encouraging Americans to take such health precautions.

Outlook

With the pandemic in a relative lull, COVID-19 vaccines readily available, and Americans collectively tired of pandemic measures, most of the country has returned to pre-pandemic activities. But there are plenty of indications that things in the US could worsen as the fall and winter progress. The influenza season, for instance, has not yet peaked, and the CDC has reported that a lower-than-normal number of Americans have gotten their annual flu shot.

While COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations remain relatively low, nearly 28,000 Americans are hospitalized with the pandemic virus, and nearly 300 per day are dying. Though the updated booster dose offers strong protection against severe diseases, **only 31.4 million Americans —10 percent of those eligible for the boosters—have gotten one.** Meanwhile, new omicron sublineages continue to evolve, chipping away at therapies, such as monoclonal antibodies. And experts still worry that another wildly different SARS-CoV-2 variant could abruptly emerge, much like omicron did at this time last year, driving a new massive wave of disease, hospitalizations, and deaths.

Still, in a summit hosted by Stat News Tuesday, White House COVID-19 Coordinator Ashish Jha offered **a rosy outlook for the rest of the winter**, saying he did not foresee a COVID-19 surge driven by holiday gatherings as was seen with last year's omicron wave. "We are in a very different place and we will remain in a different place," he said, adding that most Americans have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and many have already been infected.

"We are now at a point where I believe if you're up to date on your vaccines, you have access to treatments... there really should be no restrictions on people's activities," Jha said. "I'm pretty much living life the way I was living life in 2019."



Beth Mole / Beth is Ars Technica's health reporter. She's interested in biomedical research, infectious disease, health policy and law, and has a Ph.D. in microbiology.

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