

# Many schools in the US closed due to flu

Over the past week, many schools and school districts in the US have announced closures due to the increasingly serious spread of flu and other respiratory diseases.

At least 10 states, including Texas, Ohio, Oklahoma, Georgia, Virginia and Tennessee, have announced school closures due to the flu, a measure reminiscent of the Covid-19 lockdowns. However, officials say the closures are short-lived, with most lasting just a few days.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that there have been at least 24 million cases, 310,000 hospitalizations, and 13,000 deaths from the flu so far in 2024. The national test positivity rate has risen to 31%, up from just 18% in mid-January. Cases have spiked among children, with at least 57 deaths so far.

Influenza is a common and contagious respiratory illness that can cause a week of unpleasant symptoms such as fever, chills, cough, sore throat, runny nose and body aches. The virus spreads easily from person to person through respiratory droplets.

Flu cases remained high and continued to rise nationwide from late January to early February, according to the CDC's FluView surveillance report. At least 43 states and reported 'severe' or 'very severe' severity. Flu-related emergency room visits and hospitalizations are also on the rise.

"What worries us most is that bacterial infections can occur alongside influenza, making children very sick. Influenza and its complications can easily kill them," said Dr. Jason Newland, chief of infectious diseases at Nationwide Children's Hospital.



Illustration of seasonal flu virus. Photo: CNN

Along with the flu, the U.S. is also seeing waves of norovirus, Covid-19 and RSV. Some are calling it a 'twin pandemic.' Clinics and emergency departments are overwhelmed, said Dr. Torey Mack, chief medical officer of the Children's Hospital Association, which represents more than 200 hospitals nationwide. Many schools have also become mini-outbreaks as children infect each other.

In the US, flu typically peaks between December and February. However, this year's season started much later than usual, spiking in December and peaking after the holidays. According to many experts, the disease has not yet peaked. The number of cases, hospitalizations and deaths will continue to rise in the coming weeks. Schools are where the virus is most active. Most educational facilities in the US are closed, students are in close contact, frequently share utensils and touch surfaces, making it easy for pathogens to spread.

While school closures may seem alarming, experts say they are a normal part of the flu season. William Schaffner, professor of infectious diseases at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, said closing schools for a period of time to let the flu season pass is necessary. It won't eliminate the disease, but it can slow the spread of the virus.

"Schools are also closed because teachers have the flu and are taking leave. Many schools are taking this opportunity to do more thorough disinfection," he added.

Experts say school closures are only a short-term measure and do not mean a complete lockdown.

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