

# Japan faces another coronavirus wave, but this one's different

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Another wave of COVID-19 appears to be gathering momentum in Japan, but a high number of asymptomatic cases compared to previous outbreaks and transmissions occurring in households and workplaces are forcing officials to reconsider the way they trace cluster infections and reinforcing the need for comprehensive testing.

Authorities recorded 1,660 new cases of the novel coronavirus on Thursday — beating the previous record of 1,597 infections logged on Aug. 7 — following upticks in Hokkaido, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Aichi, Hyogo, Ibaraki and Osaka prefectures, among others.

“The central government is working with prefectural governors to prevent an explosive increase in new infections,” Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said Friday morning.

Suga insisted that, at that point in time, there was no need for the nation to declare a state of emergency, or for select prefectures to be removed from the Go To Travel campaign, an ongoing government program created to incentivize domestic travel.

COVID-19 was first detected in Japan in January, and the first and second waves peaked in April and July, respectively, according to the health ministry.

Older people in their 70s and 80s accounted for a large share of infections during the first wave, while the second wave consisted mostly of young people in their 20s and 30s — owing to cluster infections that were mostly traced back to bars, night clubs and what officials then referred to as “nightlife destinations.”

The ongoing rise in infections that began in late October, however, resembles an outbreak of an altogether different nature.

“The situation is more complicated now because cluster infections are occurring more broadly across different parts of society and deeper within specific communities,” Koji Wada, a professor at the International University of Health and Welfare, told The Japan Times.

According to Wada, who is a member of the government’s coronavirus subcommittee, more proactive measures and greater collaboration between the central government and prefectural leaders are needed to improve cluster tracing methods.

“This could be the third wave, or it could be the makings of the first big one,” he said.

On Thursday the capital saw a record-breaking number of asymptomatic cases, infections among individuals in their 40s and transmissions between family members living together or coworkers sharing working space.

“It seems the virus is being carried out of workplaces, public facilities and restaurants and into residential homes,” said Norio Ohmagari, director of the Disease Control and Prevention Center.

Tokyo officials say that as new infections emerge in different ways and places, it will become increasingly difficult to respond and that the capital will need to adjust accordingly.

Similar trends are being seen in other prefectures.

As the winter weather approaches, officials are concerned that colder temperatures will drive people indoors into tighter spaces with poor ventilation, where the virus could spread more easily.

Since Wednesday, Hokkaido has asked bars and food establishments in Sapporo to close by 10 p.m., following a consistent surge in new cases that began late last month.

Cluster infections occurring in households among family members are drawing nationwide concern as winter weather descends upon Japan’s northernmost main island, prompting officials in other prefectures to take precautions as cold temperatures move south.

According to the government’s novel coronavirus subcommittee, new clusters are emerging nationwide among foreign communities — owing to language barriers and limited access to resources — and among young people, who are more often asymptomatic.

“If this trend continues, actions taken by individuals may no longer be enough to stop the spread of the virus,” said Shigeru Omi, chair of the subcommittee and president of the Japan Community Healthcare Organization, on Thursday.

The subcommittee has urged the central government to take stronger measures to tame the ongoing rise in case numbers and contain the virus.

On Friday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato said the government may look to strengthen its authority so that if and when new measures become necessary, they can be implemented more quickly and effectively.

Kato said the government was working to increase testing capacity in and dispatching virus experts to prefectures hit hardest by the spreading virus, but he deflected a question on whether residents should avoid travel between prefectures at this time.

As an increasing number of new cases continues to emerge throughout the nation, a growing number of experts say it is on the brink of a third wave.

“I believe we can consider this the beginning of a third wave,” said Toshio Nakagawa, president of the Japan Medical Association, during a news conference Wednesday. “Hokkaido isn’t the only place that will become cold during the winter and, as cold weather moves south, it seems the temperature is spurring more infections.”

Yasutoshi Nishimura, the Cabinet minister in charge of novel coronavirus response, said stricter measures would be necessary if new infections continue to rise.

“The health care system could be overwhelmed if this continues,” Nishimura said.

Tokyo reported 393 new infections on Thursday, topping 300 cases for the second consecutive day in what experts say could signal the beginning of a sharp increase in new cases, Ohmagari said during a meeting on Thursday at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

Still, cases and fatalities due to the novel coronavirus in Japan remain low when compared to Western or European countries. As of Thursday, Japan had reported just under 114,000 infections and 1,872 deaths.