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Coronavirus seen spiking in Gloucester's wastewater

By Ethan Forman | Staff Writer

Jan 10, 2022



The latest sampling for COVID-19 virus particles in Gloucester's wastewater shows a level four times higher than it has ever been.

Health officials said this is a reliable predictor of how widespread the virus is in the community.

The Jan. 4 report from BioBot Analytics in Cambridge shows that from a sample taken on Dec. 29, the normalized virus concentration was nearly 9.6 million copies per liter of sewage. This as the seven-day rolling average of COVID-19 cases in Essex County was about 1,500, up from about half of that in mid-December, accord to the report.

Gloucester's count of new cases, according to the Health Department, has tailed off from 220 from Dec. 30 to Jan. 2, to 143 from Jan. 3 to 5. Active cases have dropped from 263 to 214 during that time period.

"The wastewater levels, which unfortunately right now are unbelievable, they are four times higher than they have ever been," said Board of Health Chairman Joe Rosa during a meeting Thursday, "but even more important than that, that is just an indicator of what we might be seeing in a week's time, basically."

The sampling was discussed in conjunction to the city's latest indoor mask mandate, which the board approved to start Monday, Jan 10.

The city's health director said wastewater sampling for COVID-19 can provide insight in how cases might surge.

"It is used as a predictive/confirming indicator, as any possible surge in case numbers would

likely appear here before being reported as actual/confirmed cases by the state,” said Health Director Max Schenk in an email.

Rosa said at the meeting he thinks the sampling of virus in wastewater is a more reliable way to gauge the level of virus in the community than case counts.

“If we are concerned about how much virus there is in the community, rather than cases, which as I just mentioned is becoming less and less reliable (due to at-home tests whose results are often not reported to the state Department of Public Health), but remains reasonably reliable is the wastewater number.”

Rosa said with the omicron variant, the issue is not how many people are infected, but rather, the number of people who have infections is only important as a substitute measure of how many people are going to end up in the hospital.

While hospitalizations may be the better measure, Rosa said he wouldn't dismiss the wastewater measurement, “because ... in the past those have been a way of predicting what will happen in the not too distant future. In other words, if wastewater levels go up really high, a week later hospitalizations are up.”

Rosa said he thought as time goes by, hospitalizations will greatly decrease “and hopefully it won't be in the too distant future.” Fundamental changes, he said, may happen by the end of this month or early February.

Board of Health member Dr. Donald Ganim, who voted against imposing the latest mask mandate, doubted wastewater sampling was a reliable metric because he said it reflected those who have been infected but who are asymptomatic.

Schenk said he respected Ganim's opinion, however, he said, “regardless of being asymptomatic, if they are diagnosed, they are required to quarantine at this point for five days, which means they should be considered in this metric that we are talking about.”

“My understanding is that if you are asymptomatic you can still pass the virus on, is that correct?” asked Board of Health member Claudia Schweitzer.

“Sure,” Rosa said.

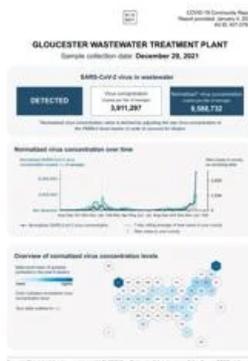
For those seeking to get their hands on an at-home rapid antigen tests, North Shore Community Health in Salem has announced a new program offering weekly distribution of the kits that have been provided through Health Resources Services Agency funding. Area shelters and food pantries received 1,135 tests during the first round of deliveries on Thursday.

The Open Door in Gloucester received 225 tests. The nonprofit serves more than 1,000 people a week, and will stagger the tests for equitable distribution starting Monday. Action Inc. in Gloucester has also received testing kits.

“It’s connections within our community, like this partnership between The Open Door and North Shore Community Health, that help bridge the gaps in access and reach some of the community’s most vulnerable people,” The Open Door President and CEO Julie LaFontaine said in a prepared statement.

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Gloucester wastewater sample, Dec. 29, 2021

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Public Health

Gloucester Board of Health
COVID-19 Public Health Emergency Regulation

Notice is hereby given that on January 6, 2022 the Gloucester Board of Health adopted the following emergency regulation under the provisions of MGL Chapter 141A, §§ 10A and 10B:

Based upon review of current COVID-19 conditions, rising positive rates, average daily incidence rates, reported hospital capacity and the rate of contact with national laboratories, the Gloucester Board of Health has found that there exists in the community a disease and cause of infection that is dangerous to public health and that action is necessary to minimize the further spread of that disease.

The Gloucester Board of Health has voted to adopt as a public health measure, the following notice and emergency regulations in the City of Gloucester:

- Effective as of January 09 2022.** This emergency that covers the town and has no regard for all municipalities, regulations or vaccination status, shall be open and allow in all indoor public spaces including but not limited to retail establishments, performance venues, social clubs, group spaces, places of religious worship, sporting facilities, and private spaces open to the public.
- For restaurants and bars with a Food Service Establishment permit from the Health Department and all other public, private and kitchen staff are not required to wear a face covering, but all public-facing staff, such as work staff and front of house staff, are required to wear a face covering while on duty.
- Restaurants with a Food Service Establishment permit from the Health Department, such as convenience stores, or alcohol use establishments shall be closed from 11:00pm to 1:00am.





Gloucester mask mandate, Jan. 6, 2022

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