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New report: COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin nursing homes drop by 47 percent after mass vaccinations

Virus still a threat: 10 homes reported first cases in 2021 after none in 2020

MADISON -- Despite a sharp overall drop in coronavirus infections in nursing homes in recent months, hundreds of U.S. nursing homes that weathered 2020 without any COVID-19 cases, including 10 in Wisconsin, have reported new cases since 2021 began. This happened even though the elderly were among the first to get COVID-19 vaccines during the initial rollout in mid-December, fueling an 83 percent drop in new cases in nursing homes nationwide by early February. In Wisconsin, new cases dropped by 47 percent.

These surprising revelations are among the findings of [the third](#) in a [series of reports](#) by WISPIRG Foundation and Frontier Group, based on analyzing government data about nursing homes and COVID-19.

Over the course of the pandemic, the nation's 15,000 nursing homes have been COVID-19 bellwethers. These new cases are a clear indication that while things are getting better, our society still faces risks from the virus. However, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services this month issued new guidance, relaxing visitation restrictions.

"With nearly 550,000 Americans dead by now, you would think we would have learned our lesson," said WISPIRG Campaign Associate Susanna Cain. "It seems, unfortunately, that carelessness and impatience could still be putting lives and communities at risk."

This latest analysis points to other areas of concern, including:

- More than 600 nursing homes nationwide reported three or more new resident cases during the first week of February, more than a month after mass vaccinations started in nursing homes.
- In Wisconsin, 89 homes reported three or more new resident cases during the same week.

- More than 7,000 nursing home residents contracted COVID-19 once last year, recovered and then were reinfected between late November and early February.
- While shortages of masks, gowns and other personal protective equipment have improved, nearly 6 percent of nursing homes in February reported a critical shortage of N95 masks, which experts say are the single best protection against contracting COVID-19.

Undoubtedly, though, the overall situation in nursing homes is improving.

The analysis found that in Wisconsin new cases among nursing home residents peaked in the fall, reaching 854 for the week ending Nov. 15. Cases dropped by several hundred in just the first week. By early February, new cases had plunged to 39 -- a decline of 21 percent in twelve weeks.

Nationally the declines were similarly impressive among staff. During the peak week, ending Dec. 13, 28,457 nursing home workers nationwide tested positive for new cases. That dropped to 5,308 -- a decrease of 81 percent in seven weeks.

“This news validates what everyone was hoping -- that the vaccines work. What’s stunning is how quickly cases plummeted after residents received just one shot,” said Cain. “Wisconsin's fantastic numbers also point to the likelihood that the state really had its act in gear as far as getting vaccines out to nursing homes early.”

The report includes research that points to the benefits achieved after the first of two shots for the vaccine brands that require a second dose. It also discusses some of the impact on nursing homes of the new \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan.

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