

December 7, 2020

Summary

The United States has 14,846,645 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 283,010 reported related deaths. Operation Warp Speed Chief Dr. Slaoui said the federal government could begin distributing Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine to the states as early as this week. An FDA advisory committee will meet to discuss the vaccine on December 10 and FDA is expected to issue an emergency use authorization soon after. IBM's cybersecurity division detected a series of sophisticated cyberattacks on organizations involved in transporting and refrigerating COVID-19 vaccines. IBM believes the attackers were trying to gain access to the targets' networks, but IBM was not able to identify the attackers' motives or determine whether any of the attacks were successful. The attackers do not appear to have targeted any United States-based organizations. President-elect Biden announced that he will appoint current California Attorney General Xavier Becerra to lead HHS and Harvard professor Dr. Rochelle Walensky to lead CDC.

The United States averaged more than 2,000 COVID-19 deaths per day for the first time over the week ending December 5 as rising hospitalizations stress healthcare systems throughout the country. Tens of millions of California residents are under stay-at-home orders effective midnight on December 7 after the state set a record for new cases on December 5 (25,000 new cases) and ICU capacity in Southern California and San Joaquin Valley fell below 15% availability. Delaware Governor John Carney issued a stay-at-home advisory on December 3 asking people not to gather indoors with anyone outside their household. Massachusetts and Rhode Island erected field hospitals to prepare for an anticipated influx of sick patients. Cases across the Midwest remain high but continue to decline after a dramatic surge throughout the fall months.

New York reported 80 deaths and 4,602 hospitalizations on Sunday, December 6, 2020. Approximately 7,302, or 4.79% of the 152,287 tests administered in New York on December 6 were positive for COVID-19. Governor Cuomo wrote an op-ed arguing that low infection rates in schools demonstrate that it is possible to control the spread of the virus through social-distancing measures. New York City preschools and elementary schools reopened today after a three-week closure. Mayor de Blasio announced that the City expects to receive more than 460,000 doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines before the end of the year. High-risk health care workers and nursing home residents and staff will be the first to receive the vaccine. Mayor de Blasio also announced that the City has directed \$20 million in funding to a Pandemic Response Institute to be formed next year that will ensure the City is prepared for future pandemics.

Presidential updates

- [*Slaoui Says COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Could Begin This Week*](#), December 6
 - Operation Warp Speed Chief Dr. Slaoui said the federal government could begin distributing doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccines to the states as early as this week if FDA issues an emergency use authorization (EUA) within the next few days.
 - An FDA advisory committee is scheduled to discuss the vaccine on December 10. Health Secretary Azar predicted that the agency will issue an EUA soon after that meeting.
 - Slaoui also told the press that, barring unexpected manufacturing problems, the vaccine will be available to all Americans at high-risk of severe illness by mid-March and to the rest of the population by May or June.
 - However, President-elect Biden expressed skepticism regarding the federal government's ability to efficiently distribute COVID-19 vaccines, noting that he has yet to see a "detailed plan . . . as to how to get the vaccine out of a container, into an injection syringe, into somebody's arm."
 - Slaoui said that his team plans to brief Biden on the government's vaccine distribution plan later this week.
- [*President-Elect Biden Announces Key Members of Health Team*](#), December 7
 - President-elect Biden announced key members of his administration who will help lead the federal government's pandemic response.
 - Biden will appoint current California Attorney General Xavier Becerra to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.
 - Infectious disease expert and Harvard professor Dr. Rochelle Walensky will lead the Center for Disease Control.
 - Dr. Vivek Murthy will serve as Surgeon General; Dr. Murthy was also the Surgeon General under President Obama.
 - Jeff Zients will serve as the White House coronavirus response coordinator; Zients is also an alumnus of the Obama administration and he spearheaded the effort to fix the healthcare.gov website after its botched rollout in 2013.
 - Biden will appoint Yale Medical School's Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith to lead a new task force aimed at reducing health inequities related to the pandemic.

World Health Organization (WHO)

- [*WHO COVID-19 Updates*](#), December 7
 - WHO published technical [guidance](#) for human resources for health managers and policy-makers at national, subnational, and facility levels to design, manage, and preserve the workforce necessary to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and maintain essential health services. The guide identifies recommendations to protect, support, and empower health workers at individual, management, organizational, and system levels.

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- [*CDC Interpretation of Forecasts of New Deaths and Hospitalizations*](#), December 3
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 37 models projecting the COVID-19 death rate. Predicted rates of increase differ among the forecasts, depending on assumptions about the prevalence and rigor of social distancing behaviors.

- CDC’s national ensemble forecast indicates that the number of newly reported COVID-19 deaths will likely increase over the next four weeks. CDC predicts that the number of cumulative COVID-19 deaths will be between 303,000 and 329,000 by December 26.
- CDC [consolidated](#) data from 12 models projecting the number of daily COVID-19 hospitalizations. Four models predict an increase in daily hospitalizations over the next four weeks, one model predicts a decrease, and four models predict stable numbers or are uncertain about the direction of the trend. The forecasts estimate 2,300 to 23,000 new COVID-19 hospitalizations per day by December 28.
- [COVIDView Weekly Surveillance Summary of U.S. COVID-19 Activity](#), December 4
 - CDC summarized key COVID-19 disease indicators for the week ending November 28.
 - The national average of respiratory specimens testing positive for COVID-19 increased from 10.7% to 11.7% from November 21 to November 28.
 - The percentage of respiratory specimens testing positive for COVID-19 increased in nine of ten regions.
 - The overall cumulative hospitalization rate was 262.8 per 100,000, up from 243.8 per 100,000 during the previous week. The overall weekly hospitalization rate is at its highest point since the beginning of the pandemic, with steep increases in adults aged 65 years and older.
 - Based on death certificate data, the percentage of total deaths attributed to pneumonia, influenza, or COVID-19 decreased 5.8% from November 21 (18.6%) to November 28 (12.8%). However, the weekly percentages of deaths due to pneumonia, influenza, or COVID-19 increased for seven weeks from early October through mid-November and are expected to increase for the most recent weeks as additional data are reported.

New York State

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), December X
 - New York reported 80 deaths and 4,602 hospitalizations on Sunday, December 6, 2020.
 - Approximately 7,302, or 4.79%, of the 152,287 tests administered in New York on December 6 were positive for COVID-19.
 - Governor Cuomo [published](#) an op-ed in *Newsday* arguing that low positivity rates in schools compared to the community at-large demonstrates that it is possible to control the spread of COVID-19 across the entire public if everyone follows public health guidelines. The governor noted that schools, on average, had infection rates under 3%, even in “yellow” micro-cluster zones. For example, Massapequa Park had a community infection rate of 6.6%, while the city’s public schools had a 3.5% infection rate.

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), December 7
 - New York City preschools and elementary schools (K-5) [reopened](#) Monday after closing on November 19, 2020. The closures were the second this school year, after in-person learning was closed for the beginning of the academic year. Testing conducted by the City has indicated that classrooms have low infection rates; as a result, officials may reconsider the 3% positivity-rate threshold for future closures.

- [*New York Area Hospitals Say Spring Lessons Will Help Them Weather COVID-19 Winter.*](#) December 6
 - Despite a second wave of infections, New York hospitals say they are more prepared and are optimistic that mortality rates will be lower compared to last spring.
 - In preparation for a second wave, hospitals stockpiled personal protective equipment, secured additional ventilators, and expanded bed capacity. Hospitals have also improved systems to balance patient loads across hospital systems to avoid overwhelming hospital staff.
 - Likewise, officials claim that new techniques, such as “proning,” or laying patients on their stomachs, administering oxygen earlier in treatment, and delaying the use of a ventilator have improved patient outcomes.
 - Population characteristics make a severe second wave less likely too. For one, nearly 20% of New York City residents are thought to have COVID-19 antibodies, which are believed to be effective and durable long after infection. Consequently, there is less “dry kindling” that could spark a larger virus spread. Additionally, patients who recently have been admitted to hospitals are younger than they were in the spring, and therefore are less likely to have a severe outcome.

- [*Second Covid-19 Wave Looms Over New York City, de Blasio Says.*](#) December 3
 - On December 3, Mayor de Blasio claimed that New York City was in the midst of a second wave of coronavirus infections, after positivity rates rose to 5.2% on December 1. Though the higher number of positive tests has not triggered new pandemic restrictions, de Blasio warned that the state was likely to impose new restrictions as virus cases continued to rise.
 - New York City expects to receive 466,000 doses of Pfizer and Moderna’s vaccine during the month of December. High-risk health-care workers and nursing-home workers and residents will be prioritized as the City begins to distribute the vaccine.
 - De Blasio also announced that the City will invest \$20 million in a new Pandemic Response Institute that will be established next year to fight future pandemics.

Other Related Updates

- [*IBM Detects Cyberattacks on COVID-19 Vaccine Supply Chain.*](#) December 3
 - IBM’s cybersecurity division detected a series of cyberattacks on corporate executives and organizations involved in transporting and refrigerating COVID-19 vaccines.
 - IBM said the attackers seem to be trying to obtain network log-in credentials, though it is unclear whether their goal was to steal information regarding the technology that will be used to transport and refrigerate the vaccines or to sabotage the vaccines’ movement.
 - Most of the attacks came in the form of “spear phishing” emails that purported to be from the Chinese corporation Haier Biomedical. The emails said that Haier wanted to place an order with the recipient and included a draft contract containing malware capable of giving the attackers access to the recipient’s network.
 - The attackers targeted organizations in Asia and Europe. IBM did not identify any targets in the United States. There is no indication that the attackers targeted Pfizer or Moderna.
 - According to IBM researchers, the attacks were sophisticated and were likely conducted by government-sponsored hackers, though IBM was unable to identify the country behind the attacks.

- IBM was not able to determine whether any of the attacks were successful.
- [United Kingdom to Begin Vaccine Rollout on December 8](#), December 7
 - The United Kingdom will begin rolling out inoculations of Pfizer/BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine on December 8, becoming the first Western nation to begin vaccinating its population against the virus.
 - Distributing the vaccine will be a major logistical challenge due to both the massive number of inoculations needed and the complex requirements of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, which requires storage at very low temperatures.
 - In part due to the difficult storage requirements, initial doses will be distributed solely at 50 hospitals throughout the nation. Officials hope to move distribution beyond hospitals relatively quickly.
 - Family doctors, temporary vaccination clinics, and retired health care workers will support the vaccination effort.
 - The distribution effort falls under the umbrella of the National Health Service (NHS). The NHS offers most health care in Britain free of charge.
- [Health Organizations Publish Guidelines for Management of COVID-19 Patients](#), December 3
 - World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), Infectious Diseases Society of America ([IDSA](#)), and National Institutes of Health ([NIH](#)) each published or updated independent but similar guidelines on the management of patients with COVID-19.
 - All three guidelines advise against the use of chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine, lopinavir/ritonavir, or azithromycin for treatment of COVID-19 patients.
 - All three guidelines agree that dexamethasone at a dose of 6 mg once daily (or an equivalent corticosteroid) should be administered to patients with moderate-to-severe COVID-19, and all advise against its use in patients with mild disease.
 - IDSA and NIH, but not WHO, recommend five days of remdesivir for patients on supplemental oxygen, but not those on mechanical ventilation or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation.
 - WHO recommends against the use of remdesivir in any situation.
 - IDSA and NIH do not recommend routine use of tocilizumab, bamlanivimab, or convalescent plasma, all of which have been approved for emergency use authorization (EUA) by Food and Drug Administration (FDA).
- [Moderna Vaccine Data Shows Durability of Response](#), December 3
 - Moderna's vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 [elicited](#) a durable immune response in 34 adults who received two 100-µg doses 28 days apart in its phase 1 trial.
 - Binding and neutralizing antibodies showed an expected slight decrease over time, but remained elevated when measured at 90 days after the second dose.
 - The results held for adults aged 18-55, 56-70, and 71 or older.
 - The mean concentration of both antibody types remained higher than that seen among 41 control participants who were recovering from COVID-19.
 - Researchers wrote "[a]lthough correlates of protection against SARS-CoV-2 infection in humans are not yet established, these results show that . . . mRNA-1273 has the potential to provide durable humoral immunity."

- Moderna applied for an EUA for the vaccine on November 30. The FDA has scheduled an advisory committee [meeting](#) to discuss the application on December 17.
- [American Academy of Pediatrics Calls for Youth Athletes to Wear Masks](#), November 30
 - American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued updated guidance on youth sports calling for participants to wear facemasks while competing.
 - The group noted certain exceptions, such as swimming, diving, and gymnastics, where the mask may become a hazard, and certain individual outdoor sports such as golf and singles tennis, where unmasked participation carries a lower risk of transmission.
 - AAP previously recommended face masks for all athletes on sidelines, in locker rooms, and when arriving and leaving from the area of play.
 - The guidelines also include recommendations for return-to-play after COVID-19 infection.
- [NIH Sponsored Two-Day Meeting to Examine Long-Term COVID-19 Illness](#), December 4
 - NIH officials, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, [emphasized](#) the urgent need to address long-term symptoms of COVID-19, warning that hundreds of thousands of Americans and millions of people worldwide might experience lingering problems that could impede their ability to work and function normally.
 - Dr. Fauci stated that even if long-term symptoms afflict only a small proportion of the millions of infected people, it is “going to represent a significant public health issue.”
 - One central issue at the meeting was whether health officials should adopt an official name for the collection of post-COVID symptoms that many people, dubbed “COVID long-haulers,” experience long after the acute phase of infection subsides.
 - CDC recently posted a list of some long-term [symptoms](#), including fatigue, joint pain, chest pain, brain fog, and depression. Other patients report breathing trouble, heart issues, and cognitive and psychological problems.
 - Two of the four long-hauler patients scheduled to speak at the meeting were unable to because they had recently been hospitalized.
 - Dr. Janet Diaz, head of clinical care for the WHO’s COVID-19 response, said the agency is planning a meeting focused on long-term COVID-19 effects and will soon begin collecting data on post-COVID symptoms and medical visits.
- [DHHS COVID-19 Updates](#), December 4
 - On December 4, DHHS [announced](#) the creation of a False Claims Act Working Group that will enhance the agency’s partnership with the Department of Justice and the HHS Office of the Inspector General to combat fraud. The Working Group will investigate potential fraud related to government funding, including funding from pandemic-relief programs. Among other funding, DHHS has provided over \$100 billion to health-care providers as part of the pandemic response.
- [FDA COVID-19 Updates](#), December 7
 - FDA [authorized](#) the first diagnostic test for at home collection of patient samples to detect both COVID-19 and influenza A and B. The self-collection kit and test from Quest Diagnostics can be used by patients at home under a health care provider’s order.

- FDA [issued](#) an EUA for the Lumin LM3000 Bioburden Reduction UV System, the first ultraviolet light based bioreduction system for emergency use in bioburden reduction of certain N95 respirators when there are insufficient supplies of filtering facepiece respirators available for medical workers.
- PrecisionFDA launched the [COVID-19 Precision Immunology App-a-thon](#), a challenge to the scientific and analytics communities to develop applications to illuminate the relationship between personalized adaptive immunity molecular data and COVID-19 disease variables.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Navigating Inability-To-Pay Claims With DOJ Amid COVID-19](#), November 20
- [SBA Proposes Detailed New Questionnaire to Evaluate Post-Hoc the Good Faith of PPP Applicants' Prior Certifications of Loan "Necessity"](#), November 11

Send questions to:

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