

February 25, 2021

Summary

The United States has 28,390,327 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 507,146 reported related deaths. On Wednesday, President Joseph Biden announced his administration will distribute millions of masks to health centers and food banks in an effort to provide vulnerable Americans with access to COVID-19 protection. That same day, Biden released a notice that the national emergency first declared by former President Donald Trump one year ago will continue, as the pandemic still poses a significant risk to public health and safety.

FDA released an analysis finding that Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine is safe, supporting the company's application for emergency-use authorization. This puts the vaccine on track to soon be authorized, and, if approved, it will become the third vaccine to be distributed to the public in the U.S. CDC released a set of case studies showing how rapidly the virus can spread in gyms, particularly during group fitness classes when masks are not used. New research has also become available regarding COVID-19 in children and transplant patients.

As of February 24, the United States is averaging fewer than 70,000 new COVID-19 cases per day—the lowest figure since October. However, the United States continues to average around 2,000 COVID-19 deaths per day. To date, about 13% of the population has received at least one dose of the vaccines, and about 6% has received two doses. Midwestern states have reported a major drop in COVID-19 positivity rates; with Indiana averaging fewer than 1,000 cases per day, and Wisconsin and Ohio reporting declines of more than 30% over the past two weeks. As of February 24, CVS Health began booking appointments for COVID-19 vaccinations in 17 states, and has nearly 570,000 doses available.

New York reported 89 deaths, 5,703 hospitalizations, and 1,124 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, February 24. Approximately 8,746, or 3.14% of the 278,942 tests administered in New York on February 24 were positive for COVID-19. As of February 24, New York has received 2,812,900 first doses of the vaccines and administered 2,562,274 first doses to patients. New York State has received 1,717,740 second doses of the vaccines and administered 1,423,284 second doses to patients. Beginning on February 25, New York will open 12 community-based pop-up vaccination sites throughout the State for limited periods of time. Governor Cuomo expects these sites to vaccinate around 3,700 people. Beginning on February 26, New York State will permit visitation of residents in nursing homes pursuant to expanded State guidance.

U.S. Government Updates

- [*Biden Administration to Deliver 25 Million Masks to Health Centers and Food Banks*](#), February 24
 - On Wednesday, officials said the Biden administration will distribute millions of masks to health centers and food banks in an effort to provide vulnerable Americans with access to COVID-19 protection.
 - According to White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff [Zients](#), the government will distribute about 25 million masks to over 1,300 community health centers and 60,000 food pantries and soup kitchens across the United States.
- [*Biden Issues Notice on the Continuation of the National Emergency Concerning COVID-19*](#), February 24
 - Biden has continued the national emergency first declared by Trump on March 13, 2020.
 - In the notice, Biden explained, “The COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause significant risk to the public health and safety of the Nation. For this reason, the national emergency declared on March 13, 2020, and beginning March 1, 2020, must continue in effect beyond March 1, 2021.”

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

- [*CDC Interpretation of Forecasts of New Deaths and Hospitalizations*](#), February 24
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 39 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 decrease over the next four weeks. It predicts between 4,300 and 12,600 new deaths and between 526,000 and 548,000 cumulative deaths by March 20, 2021.
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 12 models projecting the number of daily COVID-19 hospitalizations. The models predict daily hospitalizations will likely decrease over the next four weeks. It predicts that there will be between 1,300 and 5,000 new hospital admissions on March 22, 2021.
- [*CDC Traces COVID Outbreaks in Gyms, Urging Stricter Precautions*](#), February 24
 - On Wednesday, CDC released findings from two case studies—one in [Chicago](#) and one in [Honolulu](#)—demonstrating the rapid spread of COVID-19 during high-intensity exercise classes at gyms.
 - The results from these studies show that heavy breathing during intense physical activity confined in an indoor space increased transmissions. The researchers recommend outdoor or virtual fitness classes to reduce the risk of infection. They also stressed the importance of good ventilation and mask-wearing, even during exercise.
 - In the [Chicago](#) study, researchers identified 55 infections among 81 people who attended high-intensity, in-person fitness classes at one gym between August 24 and September 1. Of those 55 people, 22 of them had gone to a class the day they developed their first symptoms or the day after. Three went to a class after receiving a positive test result. In total, 43 members participated in group classes while they were possibly infectious. Class sizes were limited to 25% of their usual size and participants, while

required to wear a mask when entering the gym, were allowed to remove their masks while exercising.

- In the [Honolulu](#) study, investigators linked 21 infections to one fitness instructor. Just hours before developing his first symptoms, the instructor taught a spin class with ten participants. No one wore a mask, and all ten later tested positive. The instructor also held several small kickboxing sessions and one personal training session. Eleven people participated in these sessions, and ten were infected.

New York State

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), February 25
 - New York reported 89 deaths, 5,703 hospitalizations, and 1,124 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, February 24, 2021.
 - Approximately 8,746, or 3.14% of the 278,942 tests administered in New York on February 24 were positive for COVID-19.
 - As of February 24, New York has received 2,812,900 first doses of the vaccines and administered 2,562,274 first doses to patients. As of February 24, New York has received 1,717,740 second doses of the vaccines and administered 1,423,284 second doses to patients.
 - New York State will [open](#) 12 more community-based pop-up vaccination sites throughout the State from February 25 – 27. Each site will administer first dose vaccines for 1 – 2 days at a time, depending upon the location, and then close. The sites will then reopen three weeks after their respective closing date to administer second doses. Governor Cuomo expects these sites to vaccinate around 3,700 people.
- [Cuomo Announces Expanded Guidelines for Nursing Home Visitations](#), February 22
 - Beginning on February 26, New York State will [permit](#) visitation of residents in nursing homes pursuant to expanded guidance. Specifically, the nursing home must be in accordance with guidance from both Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and Center for Disease Control and Prevention.
 - Furthermore, the State issued COVID-19 testing requirements based on the seven-day, rolling average positivity rate of the county where the nursing home is located. Visitors in counties with positivity rates between 5 – 10% must receive a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of visitation, or take a rapid test at the nursing home. Visitors in counties with COVID-19 positivity rates below 5% are not required to take a COVID-19 test, however testing is strongly encouraged. Visitation is not permitted if the county's COVID-19 positivity rate is greater than 10%, but compassionate care visits are always permitted.
 - Facilities may void the testing requirements if visitors provide proof of a completed COVID-19 vaccination no less than 14 days from the date of the visit and no more than 90 days prior to the visit.

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), February 25
 - Beginning March 5, New York City movie theaters can [reopen](#) at 25% capacity. New York City theaters must comply with New York State guidelines, which require

assigned seating, use of face masks, enhanced cleaning and ventilation protocols, and a limit of 50 occupants per theater (irrespective of the 25% capacity allowance).

- On February 25, New York City public middle schools will [re-open](#) for in-person learning after more than two months of virtual classes. According to New York City Department of Education, about half of the City’s approximately 470 middle schools will serve all, or most of, their children five days a week. The schools that cannot bring back all students will prioritize serving their “most vulnerable students” (such as those with disabilities, those who are living in shelters, and those who are multilingual learners) five days a week, and continue with a hybrid model for other students.

Vaccines and Therapeutics

- [FDA Analysis Of Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine Finds It Safe, Effective](#), February 24
 - U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Wednesday released an [analysis](#) of the COVID-19 vaccine developed by Johnson & Johnson. The analysis supports authorizing the vaccine for emergency use.
 - FDA stated that the vaccine has a “favorable safety profile” and trials showed “no specific safety concerns identified that would preclude issuance of an [emergency use authorization].” A panel of FDA advisors will meet Friday to evaluate the vaccine and make a recommendation as to whether it should be authorized for emergency use.
 - Unlike the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine would require only a one-shot administration per patient, rather than the other vaccines’ two required doses.
 - FDA’s review noted that an international study showed the vaccine to be only 66% effective in preventing moderate to severe COVID-19 disease, compared for the 95% and 94% efficacy figures for Pfizer and Moderna, respectively. However, according to Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Health, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is just as effective as the other two vaccines when it comes to preventing hospitalizations and deaths.
 - A Johnson & Johnson executive told Congress on Tuesday that 4 million doses will be available in the U.S. as soon as the vaccine is authorized. A total of 20 million will be ready by the end of March and 100 million by the end of June.
- [The Virus Can Sicken Children in Very Different Ways, A New Study Finds](#), February 24
 - A large nationwide study [published](#) in the Journal of the American Medical Association compared the two major ways children have become seriously ill from the coronavirus: acute COVID-19 (the predominantly lung-related illness that afflicts most adults who get sick) and Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children ([MIS-C](#)) (an inflammatory syndrome that sometimes emerges in children weeks after an initial infection).
 - Young people with MIS-C were more likely to be between the ages of six and twelve, while most patients with acute COVID-19 were either younger than six or older than twelve.
 - MIS-C patients were more likely to need treatment in an intensive-care unit. Their [symptoms](#) were more likely to include heart problems and inflammation, as well as issues with the skin and mucous membranes, than patients with acute COVID.

- More than two-thirds of the patients with either condition were Black or Hispanic (which likely reflects the fact that those groups have been disproportionately exposed to the virus more generally), but Black children appeared to be at greater risk for developing MIS-C than acute COVID.
- Young people with MIS-C were much more likely to have been previously healthy than those with acute COVID. However, more than one-third of young acute COVID patients had no previous underlying condition.
- [*Transplant Patient Dies After Receiving Lungs Infected With Coronavirus*](#), February 24
 - A Michigan woman [died](#) last fall, 61 days after receiving a lung transplant from a donor who had been infected with the coronavirus.
 - Doctors said that there had been no indication that the donor, a woman who died in a car accident, had COVID-19—a test came back negative and a radiograph of her chest seemed clear. But doctors later questioned those results, and now conclude that she must have been carrying the virus when she died and that her lungs infected both the transplant patient and the surgeon who performed the transplant.
 - This is the first confirmed case of a patient contracting the virus from an organ donation, according to a peer-reviewed [report](#) on the incident published in *The American Journal of Transplantation*. The report recommends that medical professionals test lung donors for COVID-19 by using a sample from their lower respiratory tract, a more invasive measure than the typical nasal swab used on the general public. Presently, this method is not required, and is only used on about one-third of donated lungs.

International

- The rates of COVID-19 infection across [Europe](#) have plummeted to half of their winter peak, according to World Health Organization (WHO).
- [WHO](#) also said that about 1 in 10 people who have contracted COVID-19 still suffer symptoms three months after infection.
- Across many [South American](#) countries, including Peru, Argentina, and Ecuador, prosecutors are investigating national and local politicians and their families for allegedly receiving preferential access to scarce COVID-19 vaccines.
- Many European leaders are escalating calls for the European Union to introduce “[vaccine passports](#)” that would allow people who have been inoculated against the virus to travel. These leaders fear the economic losses associated with another summer without tourism. However, others are concerned vaccine passports will lead to tensions between those who are vaccinated and those who are not.
- Two [Chinese](#) vaccine makers have said their COVID-19 vaccines are effective at preventing serious illness. Already, China has approved two vaccines—one from Sinopharm and one from Sinovac Biotech—for use. If approved, these next two—one from CanSinoBIO and another from Sinopharm—would speed up China’s efforts to vaccinate its 1.4 billion people. The vaccine producers say the new vaccines are 65% and 72% effective against COVID-19, respectively.
- On Wednesday, [Germany](#)’s pharmaceutical regulation approved three rapid-at-home COVID-19 tests.

- Also on Wednesday, [Ghana](#) became the first country to receive vaccines from the COVAX initiative, an international effort to distribute vaccine doses to low and middle-income countries. Ghana received 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccines that were produced in India. The Ivory Coast is scheduled to receive doses from COVAX later this week.

Other Updates

- [Department of Labor Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims Report](#), February 25
 - Department of Labor (DOL) reports that another 730,000 workers filed initial claims (seasonally adjusted) for unemployment benefits last week.
 - The number of new claims had trended downward since March, when nearly seven million people filed for unemployment insurance in a single week. Claims began spiking again around December, but are beginning to come down once again.
 - 451,402 new claims were filed for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, the federal program intended to help freelancers, gig workers, the self-employed, and others not normally eligible for state jobless benefits.
- [“Tight” Cultures May Fare Better than “Loose” Cultures in a Pandemic](#), February 23
 - According to a study published in *The Lancet Planetary Health*, “loose” nations—those with “weaker norms” and “permissive cultures”—fared worse than “tight” nations—those with “stricter rules and punishments for deviance”—during the pandemic.
 - According to the study, which examined data from 57 countries, “loose” nations had five times more COVID-19 cases and over eight times more related deaths than “tight” countries.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Nine Key Takeaways for Providers as Illinois Returns to Phase 4 of the “Restore Illinois” Plan](#), February 11

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