

January 25, 2021

Summary

The United States has 25,235,095 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 420,439 reported related deaths. As new COVID-19 variants emerge across the globe, President Joseph Biden seeks to prevent them from gaining a foothold in the United States. Though the variants first found in the United Kingdom and Brazil are already in the United States, Biden hopes to keep out the South Africa variant by placing a ban on travelers from that country. Furthermore, he extended the ban on travelers from parts of Europe and Brazil. Today, Moderna announced that it would develop a booster shot to protect against variants of COVID-19. Merck & Co. halved its COVID-19 pipeline after data from Phase I trials indicated that its two vaccine candidates generated immune responses that were inferior to those seen following natural infection and those reported for other vaccines. Moderna and Pfizer have both pledged to deliver 100 million doses of their COVID-19 vaccines to the United States by the end of March, but neither is on track to deliver. To do so, the companies would need to ramp up their weekly dose delivery from the current 4.3 million doses to 7.5 million each.

California lifted its regional stay-at-home orders for San Joaquin Valley, the Bay Area, and Southern California after infection rates decreased and hospital capacity increased. Massachusetts scaled back its curfew, which had required businesses to close by 9:30 p.m.; restrictions on the size of social gatherings remain in place. Michigan National Guard deployed an additional 300 Guard members to assist in the state's vaccination and testing efforts.

New York reported 167 deaths, 8,730 hospitalizations, and 1,005 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, January 24, 2021. Approximately 12,003, or 5.47% of the 219,538 tests administered in New York on January 24 were positive for COVID-19. As of January 24, New York has received 2,395,950 doses of the vaccines and administered 1,365,404 doses to patients. Governor Cuomo announced that the rate of transmission of coronavirus dropped below one in New York, an indicator that the virus is spreading less quickly. Governor Cuomo's proposed FY 2022 budget includes a 4% sales tax to be assessed against short-term rentals provided through companies like Airbnb, which could provide \$10 million in tax revenue next year and \$18 million in tax revenue in subsequent years. Mayor de Blasio announced that the City would postpone mass vaccinations scheduled at Yankee Stadium, Citi Field, and Empire Outlets due to the City's vaccine shortage. The mayor said that the City has 19,000 first doses remaining, and expects to receive a shipment of 107,000 first doses during the week. The City's teachers' union said that public schools could remain closed into the next academic year unless more teachers are vaccinated; currently, 9,000 of 120,000 teachers who are part of the union have been vaccinated.

Presidential updates

- [*Biden Bars Travelers from South Africa; Extends Travel Ban on Citizens from Some European Countries and Brazil*](#), January 25
 - Biden has banned all noncitizen travelers from South Africa to the United States.
 - Biden hopes the order will prevent the spread of a COVID-19 variant first discovered in South Africa. Initial [studies](#) published last week indicate that the variant may be less susceptible to antibodies created by both natural infection and the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.
 - The travel ban is expected to go into effect on January 30.
 - Additionally, Biden has [extended](#) a ban on travelers from the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, Brazil, and the Schengen Area that was set to expire on Tuesday.
 - Today, Minnesota officials confirmed the first U.S. case of the highly transmissible variant first found in [Brazil](#).
 - The January 12 [order](#) requiring all passengers flying to the United States present evidence of a negative COVID-19 test before boarding their flights will go into effect on January 26.

World Health Organization (WHO)

- [*WHO COVID-19 Updates*](#), January 25
 - On January 22, COVAX, the global vaccine initiative, announced the signing of an advance purchase agreement with Pfizer for up to 40 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine candidate. With the additional doses, COVAX has agreements in place to access over 2 billion doses of vaccines.
 - The COVID-19 subcommittee of the Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety met on January 19 to review available data related to reported deaths of elderly and frail individuals who received the Pfizer vaccine. The subcommittee concluded that the vaccines did not cause an increase in mortality rates, and did not require a revision of the safety recommendations for the vaccine.

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

- [*COVIDView Weekly Surveillance Summary of U.S. COVID-19 Activity*](#), January 22
 - CDC summarized key COVID-19 disease indicators for the week ending January 16.
 - The national average of respiratory specimens testing positive for COVID-19 decreased from 14.7% to 11.9% from January 9 to January 16. The percentage of respiratory specimens testing positive for COVID-19 declined in all 10 regions.
 - The overall cumulative hospitalization rate is 380.3 per 100,000. The weekly hospitalization rate for the week ending on January 9 was 9.7 per 100,000. The weekly hospitalization rate reached its highest point at 17.8 per 100,000 during the week ending December 12.
 - Based on death certificate data, the percentage of total deaths attributed to pneumonia, influenza, or COVID-19 for the week ending January 9 was 14.7%. The percentage remains above the epidemic threshold and will likely increase as more death certificates are processed.
- [*Allergic Reactions Including Anaphylaxis after Receipt of the First Dose of Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine*](#), January 22

- On January 22, CDC published a study on allergic reactions to the first dose of Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine.
- Between December 21 and January 10, the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System recorded 10 cases of anaphylaxis following the first dose of the vaccine.
- Over 4 million doses were administered, bringing the rate of a severe allergic reaction to 2.5 per million doses. In nine cases, anaphylaxis occurred within 15 minutes of vaccination.
- On January 15, CDC published a similar study on allergic reactions to the first dose of [Pfizer](#)’s COVID-19 vaccine. The rate of a severe allergic reaction to the Pfizer vaccine was 11.1 per million doses.

New York State

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), January 25
 - New York reported 167 deaths, 8,730 hospitalizations, and 1,005 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, January 24, 2021.
 - Approximately 12,003, or 5.47% of the 219,538 tests administered in New York on January 24 were positive for COVID-19.
 - As of January 24, New York has received 2,395,950 doses of the vaccines and administered 1,365,404 doses to patients.
 - On January 25, Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that rate of transmission of coronavirus cases within the State has dropped below one, indicating that a person carrying the virus will, on average, infect less than one person during the course of his or her infection. A rate below one also indicates that community spread is beginning to wane throughout the State.
 - Governor Cuomo’s proposed FY 2022 budget [includes](#) a 4% sales tax on short-term rentals made through home-sharing companies like Airbnb, which is expected to generate \$10 million in additional tax revenue during the upcoming fiscal year, and \$18 million in subsequent fiscal years, to help offset a \$10.2 billion budget deficit. The law would allow local governments to assess their own sales taxes in addition to the state tax. Currently, Airbnb has voluntary tax agreements with local governments in 34 of New York’s 62 counties. Opponents of the bill argue that the tax will create upward pressure on already-high New York rents.

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), January 25
 - On January 25, Mayor de Blasio [announced](#) that New York City has administered over 628,831 vaccines, but that the City “urgently” needs more supply. The City has 19,000 first doses remaining, with 107,000 expected in resupply later this week.
 - On January 25, Mayor de Blasio [said](#) that New York City was postponing the opening of mass vaccination sites at Yankee Stadium, Citi Field, and Empire Outlets in Staten Island, due to the State’s low supply of vaccines.
 - Due to the low supply of vaccines and the low rate of vaccinations among teachers, the City’s teachers’ union said that New York City public schools are not likely to reopen for five-day-a-week classes during this school year and could be forced to continue remote learning into the 2021–2022 academic year. The teachers’ union has started a program to connect teachers with vaccine providers, which has helped 9,000 teachers

receive vaccinations to date. That number falls far short of the union’s goal to vaccinate 10,000 members per day. 120,000 Department of Education employees are a part of the teachers’ union.

Other Related Updates

- [*Moderna Announces Vaccine Upgrades to Protect Against Emerging Variants*](#), January 25
 - On January 25, Moderna announced that it would be developing a booster shot to protect against variants of COVID-19.
 - Moderna’s study, conducted with the Vaccine Research Center at National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, indicated that the current vaccine remained effective against the U.K. coronavirus variant, but was six times less effective against the South African variant. Although less effective, the vaccine continued to create neutralizing antibodies that can protect against the variants. The study has not yet been published or peer reviewed.
 - The booster shots are being developed “out of an abundance of caution,” because the South African variant indicates that the efficacy of the vaccine could wane, and because immunity may go down over time.

- [*Merck Halves COVID-19 Pipeline, Halts Two Vaccines, Continues Two Drugs*](#), January 25
 - Merck & Co. halved its COVID-19 pipeline after data from Phase I trials indicated that its two vaccine candidates—V590 and V591—generated immune responses that were “inferior to those seen following natural infection and those reported for other SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 vaccines.”
 - V590 is a vaccine candidate based on Merck’s recombinant vesicular stomatitis virus, which uses an attenuated strain of a common animal virus that was modified to express SARS-CoV-2 proteins to trigger an immune response. Merck developed V590 in partnership with IAVI, a nonprofit scientific research organization dedicated to addressing urgent, unmet global health challenges.
 - V591 is a measles vector candidate engineered to express SARS-CoV-2 proteins on its surface. Institut Pasteur initially developed the measles vector in consortium with Themis and University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Vaccine Research and licensed the vector to Themis. Merck subsequently acquired the license after acquiring Themis as a wholly-owned subsidiary in 2020.
 - Merck still has two coronavirus drugs in its development pipeline. Molnupavir (MK-4482) is an oral novel investigational agent in mid-to-late phase trials, which it acquired from Ridgeback Biotherapeutics last July. MK-7710 is an investigational recombinant fusion protein designed to modulate the inflammatory immune response to COVID-19. Merck acquired the drug after it acquired OncoImmune on December 23, 2020. MK-7710 is in Phase II/III trials.

- [*Moderna and Pfizer Need to Nearly Double COVID-19 Vaccine Deliveries to Meet Goals*](#), January 22
 - Both Moderna and Pfizer pledged to deliver 100 million doses of their COVID-19 vaccines to the United States by the end of March. Currently, neither is on track to meet that goal.

- Throughout January, the companies have delivered about 4.3 million doses a week, but to make good on their promises, they must deliver 7.5 million doses each week for the next nine weeks.
- Scaling up production is challenging: the United States faces supply shortfalls of chemical ingredients, glass vials, and skilled labor; existing vaccine production facilities are already working at “maximal capacity”; and RNA, which forms the basis of both vaccines, is very fragile. Biden has invoked the [Defense Production Act](#) to address certain supply shortfalls, but building and inspecting new facilities would take years. Furthermore, scientists are cautioning vaccine makers to not rush production of the delicate doses if they cannot guarantee their quality.
- [*Full-Dose Blood Thinners Decreased Need for Life Support and Improved Outcome in Hospitalized COVID-19 Patients*](#), January 22
 - A worldwide clinical trial indicated that full dose anti-coagulation (blood thinner) treatments given to moderately ill patients hospitalized for COVID-19 reduced the need for vital organ support, such as ventilation.
 - Early in the pandemic, physicians observed increased rates of blood clots and inflammation among COVID-19 patients, which led to lung failure, heart attack, and stroke.
- [*California Lifts Statewide COVID Stay-At-Home Order, Allowing Restaurants to Reopen*](#), January 25
 - On January 25, California Governor Gavin Newsom lifted a stay-at-home order which applied to three of the state’s five regions—the San Joaquin Valley, the Bay Area, and Southern California. The stay-at-home order had been lifted previously in the state’s other two regions, Northern California and Greater Sacramento.
 - As a result of the order, restaurants will be permitted to host outdoor diners. Now, restrictions will move back to a county-by-county tiered system, which will allow businesses to re-open depending on the level of COVID-19 spread in the area. Most counties are expected to be classified as the highest risk level.
 - California decided to lift the ban after ICU capacity in the three regions exceeded 15%, a predetermined threshold to ensure sufficient capacity for hospitals that recently had been overwhelmed with patients.
- [*Relaxed COVID Restrictions Take Effect in Massachusetts*](#), January 25
 - On Monday morning, business restrictions requiring all businesses to close by 9:30 p.m. were lifted, along with a statewide curfew from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m.
 - Businesses such as health clubs, movie theaters, casinos, liquor stores, and cannabis retailers may remain open past 9:30 p.m.
 - A 25% capacity restriction remains in place for at least another two weeks, and in-person gatherings remain restricted to 10 people indoors and 25 people outdoors.
 - The order comes after hospitalizations have decreased 10% and the average positivity rate has declined 33% since early January.

- [*Michigan National Guard Deploys Additional Troops to Assist State with COVID-19 Response*](#), January 24
 - The Michigan National Guard has deployed an additional 300 guard members to assist the COVID-19 response force provide vaccinations and testing across the state.
 - Michigan is in Phase 1B of its vaccination plan, which includes Michigan residents over age 65. As more residents become eligible for the vaccine, the need for support has increase. The Michigan National Guard has administered 32,000 vaccines to Michiganders.

- [*FDA COVID-19 Updates*](#), January 22
 - As a result of an investigation by FDA’s Office of Criminal Investigations, Department of Justice charged Johnny T. Stine, the owner of North Coast Biologics, for selling fraudulent COVID-19 vaccines for \$400–\$1,000.
 - On January 22, FDA announced that it would reissue emergency use authorizations for decontamination systems designed to sanitize N95 respirators when there is an insufficient supply of new respirators. N95 respirators may be decontaminated a maximum of four times.

- [*Mail Delivery Delays Continue Across the County*](#), January 22
 - Even though the holidays are over, United States Postal Service (USPS) is still struggling to delivery mail on time.
 - While USPS is “still digging out from under an avalanche of mail sent during the recent holiday season,” the cause of the delays goes deeper.
 - First, the virus has impacted many USPS employees. According to American Postal Workers Union official Jennifer Kowalczyk, “on any give day, we’re six to 12 carriers short out of 60 routes.”
 - Second, operational changes put in place to “stop the system from hemorrhaging money” in mid-2020 have created a massive backlog of mail.
 - Finally, online shopping has skyrocketed during the pandemic as people stay home as much as possible.
 - The affects of the slowdown are serious; for example, many people are receiving bills that are already past due.

- [*With Six Months to Go, the Tokyo Olympics Are Swimming Against a Tide of Doubt*](#), January 23
 - The International Olympic Committee and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga believe the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo will begin in six months as scheduled. The games, initially planned for July 2020, were postponed due to the global pandemic.
 - However, many are not so optimistic. Tokyo was placed under a state of emergency on January 7 in an attempt to quell a large wave of infections, and Japanese opinion of hosting the games has soured. Moreover, new COVID-19 variants are quickly spreading around the world.
 - If the games do go forward, officials must tackle many serious questions: “whether [the games will be] safe for spectators, athletes and the broader Japanese public; whether the sporting integrity of the Games can be maintained; [and] whether the Japanese public can be brought around.”

International Updates

- British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is expected to extend [England](#)'s lockdown as the country wrestles with a more contagious COVID-19 variant. On Friday, Johnson also said the variant “may be associated with a higher degree of [mortality](#).”
- Countries across the globe are criticizing [China](#)'s COVID-19 vaccines. At least 19 countries—many of which are low-income—have purchased Chinese vaccines, but the drug companies have been slow to ship doses, and research indicates the vaccines are not as effective as are those developed by Pfizer and Moderna.
- [Mexican](#) President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has contracted COVID-19 and is undergoing what he described as “medical treatment” for “mild symptoms.”
- [Australia](#) has approved the Pfizer vaccines for use in persons aged 16 and older. This is the first vaccine approved by the country.
- In the [Netherlands](#), large crowds protested new COVID-19 lockdowns over the weekend. Law enforcement officials in the country warned that the violence could last [weeks](#).
- According to global health experts, billions around the [globe](#) may not receive COVID-19 vaccinations until 2022 or 2023. *Bloomberg*, which tracks global vaccine distribution, shows that almost no doses have been administered in the whole of [Africa](#). Former President of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf says this is because many countries simply do not have the resources to purchase vaccines.
- [Israel](#) will close its only major airport for at least a week in an attempt to vaccinate its population before new COVID-19 variants entrench themselves in the country.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Unexpected Uses of Personal Data in the Coronavirus Pandemic Continue](#), January 13
- [To Vaccinate or Not to Vaccinate – That is the Question, but Who Should Know the Answer?](#), January 13
- [Podcast: COVID-19: Pandemic Fundraising Insights and What Lies Ahead for Private Equity in 2021: Conversation with Tom Burger, Gridiron Capital](#), January 8
- [Podcast: COVID-19: End of Life Fund Issues](#), January 6

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