

January 4, 2021

Summary

The United States has 20,667,587 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 351,872 reported related deaths. On January 3, President Trump claimed CDC's coronavirus case and death counts are exaggerated. Dr. Fauci disagreed, calling CDC's numbers "very real." Operation Warp Speed Chief Slaoui said the federal government is contemplating recommending administering two half doses of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine to stretch limited vaccine supplies across more people. Slaoui said Moderna's clinical trials demonstrated that people aged 18 to 55 who receive two 50-microgram doses of the vaccine show an identical immune response to those who receive two 100-microgram doses. According to CDC, the United States has administered approximately 4.5 million vaccine doses, far short of the federal government's goal of administering 20 million doses by the end of 2020. However, Surgeon General Adams said the White House Coronavirus Task Force is "working every day" to help the states overcome logistical problems that have slowed the rollout and vaccine administration is beginning to accelerate.

Across the country, 35 states reported more new cases for the week ending January 3 than they had the week before, indicating the beginning of a likely holiday surge following Christmas. The real increase is likely higher, given delays in testing and reporting over the holidays. California became the third state to surpass 25,000 COVID-19 deaths on December 31, joining New York and Texas, as hospitals in the state remain stretched to capacity. A coronavirus variant originally discovered in the United Kingdom and believed to be more transmissible than other strains has now been detected in three states—Colorado, California, and Florida. Arizona Governor Doug Ducey extended a "Good Samaritan" executive order through March 31 that protects health care workers and facilities from civil liability in their treatment of COVID-19 patients, so long as they acted in good faith.

New York reported 170 deaths, 8,251 hospitalizations, and 1,357 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, January 3, 2021. Approximately 11,209, or 8.34% of the 134,360 tests administered in New York on January 3 were positive for COVID-19. As of January 3, New York has received 895,925 doses and administered 274,713 doses of the COVID-19 vaccines. New York became the fourth state to surpass one million confirmed cases of COVID-19. New York will allow more than 6,000 fans to attend the Buffalo Bills' playoff game this weekend. Governor Cuomo pledged not to take the COVID-19 vaccine until Black, Hispanic, and poor individuals within his "group" receive the vaccine. New York City plans to distribute one million vaccines by the end of January; the City has administered 88,410 as of January 3.

Presidential updates

- [Operation Warp Speed Officials Contemplate Altering Vaccine Dosage to Vaccinate More People](#), January 3
 - Operation Warp Speed Chief Slaoui said the federal government is contemplating recommending that states administer two half doses (50 micrograms per dose) of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine instead of two full doses (100 micrograms per dose) in order to vaccinate more people.
 - Slaoui noted that Moderna's clinical trials demonstrated that people ages 18 to 55 who received two half doses showed an identical immune response to those who received two full doses.
 - Slaoui indicated that White House officials are in talks with FDA and Moderna regarding recommending the half doses.
 - Dr. Fauci has [expressed](#) skepticism regarding halving the Moderna vaccine doses.
 - FDA will make the final [decision](#) about whether the federal government moves forward with the plan.
 - Recently, British officials [announced](#) a plan to prioritize administering as many first vaccine doses as possible and potentially delaying second doses to vaccinate more people.
 - Both Dr. Fauci and Slaoui have [expressed](#) skepticism regarding delaying second doses, noting that there is no data regarding the effect delays will have on vaccine recipients' immunity.

World Health Organization (WHO)

- [WHO COVID-19 Updates](#), January 4
 - WHO [listed](#) Pfizer/BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use, making it the first vaccine to receive validation from the organization. WHO's Emergency Use Listing (EUL) opens the door for countries to expedite their own regulatory approval processes and begin to import and administer the vaccine.

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

- [CDC Interpretation of Forecasts of New Deaths and Hospitalizations](#), December 30
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 33 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 predicts that the number of cumulative COVID-19 deaths will be between 383,000 and 424,000 by January 23, 2021.
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 13 models projecting the number of daily COVID-19 hospitalizations. The national ensemble forecast predicts that there will be 8,600 to 21,000 new COVID-19 hospitalizations per day by January 25, 2021.
- [COVIDView Weekly Surveillance Summary of U.S. COVID-19 Activity](#), January 4
 - CDC summarized key COVID-19 disease indicators for the week ending December 26.
 - The national average of respiratory specimens testing positive for COVID-19 decreased slightly from 12.4% to 12.3% from December 19 to December 26.
 - Regionally, the percentage of respiratory specimens testing positive for COVID-19 increased in five of ten regions.

- The overall cumulative hospitalization rate is 326.7 per 100,000. The overall weekly hospitalization rate reached its highest point at 16.9 per 100,000 in the beginning of December and remains elevated.
- Based on death certificate data, the percentage of total deaths attributed to pneumonia, influenza, or COVID-19 (“PIC”) has been increasing since October and has exceeded the percentage of deaths due to PIC observed during the summer peak.

New York State

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), January 4
 - New York reported 170 deaths, 8,251 hospitalizations, and 1,357 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, January 3, 2021.
 - Approximately 11,209, or 8.34% of the 134,360 tests administered in New York on January 3 were positive for COVID-19.
 - As of January 3, New York has received 895,925 doses and administered 274,713 doses of the COVID-19 vaccines.
 - New York [became](#) the fourth state with more than one million confirmed cases of COVID-19 on January 2. The other three states include California (2.8 million confirmed cases), Texas (1.7 million confirmed cases), and Florida (1.3 million confirmed cases). Public health officials believe the confirmed case tally represents a significant undercount because many were infected in the spring before testing was widely available.
 - Governor Cuomo and New York State Health Commissioner Howard Zucker [reached](#) an agreement with the Buffalo Bills to allow more than 6,000 people to attend the Bills’ playoff game on January 9 or 10. Attendees will be spaced throughout the stadium, be required to wear masks at all times, and must agree to contact tracing after the game. The governor characterized the decision as an effort to reopen the economy.
 - Governor Cuomo [pledged](#) not to take the vaccine “until the vaccine is available for my group in Black, Hispanic, and poor communities around the state.” He explained that Black and Hispanic individuals die at a greater rate and had less COVID testing compared to richer and whiter communities, and that there was a history of distrust toward vaccinations among the Black population. Governor Cuomo’s actions contrast with many politicians who have publicized their inoculations.

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), January 4
 - New York City officials [plan](#) to administer one million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine by the end of January. Achieving the goal will require the City to open 250 vaccination sites inside school gymnasiums, community health centers, and current testing facilities. To date, the City has administered 88,410 of the 430,000 vaccine doses it has received.

Other Related Updates

- [Scientists in U.S. and U.K. Debate New Vaccination Tactics](#), January 3
 - Scientists are [debating](#) novel vaccination strategies to quell the pandemic in response to the more infections U.K. COVID-19 variant and the slow vaccination rollout in the United States.

- Possible strategies include (i) withholding second doses of the vaccines to provide initial doses to a wider number of people; and (ii) mixing and matching vaccines to increase the availability of second doses.
 - U.K. officials have already adopted both strategies. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which advises U.K. health departments, has [advised](#) health care providers to prioritize administering first doses to at-risk groups before administering second doses. U.K. officials have also adopted the [mix-and-match](#) regime that allows patients to receive a second dose from a different company’s vaccine if the same vaccine is not available.
 - These decisions contradict U.S. CDC guidelines, which find that the authorized COVID-19 vaccines “[are not interchangeable](#),” and that “the safety and efficacy of a mixed-product series have not been evaluated.”
 - Some U.S. experts believe that the United States should similarly delay second doses in favor of inoculating more people with a first dose, but there is no data to compare the efficacy of a one-dose regimen versus a two-dose regimen. Others experts, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, prefer the two-dose regimen, which has been proven 94–95% effective.
- [India Approves Vaccines by Oxford-AstraZeneca and Bharat Biotech](#), January 3
 - On January 3, India announced that it had approved two COVID-19 vaccines for emergency use: the AstraZeneca/Oxford University, and a vaccine by Indian company Bharat Biotech.
 - Regulators faced swift criticism about the government’s lack of transparency about clinical trial protocols and data. All India Drug Action Network, a public health watchdog, immediately requested more information about the scope of clinical trials and dosing regimens, and publicly commented that it was “baffled to understand what scientific logic has motivated the top experts” to authorize the Bharat Biotech vaccine, which is still in clinical trials.
 - Dr. Somani, India’s lead drug control regulator, responded that the vaccine has already been administered to 22,500 trial participants, and “has been found to be safe.”
 - Officials in India moved quickly for a number of reasons. The country is second in confirmed infections behind the United States, and the outbreak is likely worse than official figures suggest. Unemployment is at a 45-year high, and officials are worried about the long-term impact of education disruptions caused by the virus.
 - [HHS: Distilleries Won’t Have to Pay FDA Fees of More than \\$14K for Making Hand Sanitizers Amid Pandemic](#), December 31
 - HHS directed FDA not to collect fees assessed to distilleries that revamped their operations to produce hand sanitizers during the pandemic.
 - Distilleries were assessed two fees—a \$14,060 Monograph Drug Facility Fee and a \$9,373 Contract Manufacturing Organization Facility Fee—that would have been due on February 12, 2021.
 - The fees were required under the CARES Act, which Congress passed in March. FDA originally said that the Act did not allow the fees to be waived, but that they were willing to work with Congress to address the issue

- According to *USA Today*, distilleries that wish to avoid the fees in 2022 should stop producing hand sanitizers by December 31, 2020.
- [*NIH Study Reveals Damage, but No Virus, in COVID-19 Patients' Brains*](#), December 30
 - An in-depth study of how COVID-19 affects patients' brains [revealed](#) consistent hallmarks of damage caused by thinning and leaky brain blood vessels, but no signs of SARS-CoV-2 virus in the tissue samples.
 - Although COVID-19 is primarily a respiratory disease, patients often experience neurological problems, and the disease can also cause patients to suffer strokes and other neuropathologies.
 - The study examined brain tissue samples from 19 COVID-19 patients who had died shortly after reporting symptoms. Images from a high-powered magnetic resonance imaging scanner revealed areas of inflammation in which blood vessels thinned and leaked blood proteins, triggering an inflammatory immune reaction, and other areas of blood clotting and leaking without an immune response.
 - Avindra Nath, M.D., clinical director of the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, [explained](#) that COVID-19 patients "may be susceptible to microvascular blood vessel damage" in the brain, "caused by the body's inflammatory response to the virus." However, "results suggest that the damage we saw may not have been caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus directly infecting the brain."
- [*Department of Labor Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims Report*](#), December 31
 - Department of Labor (DOL) [reports](#) that another 787,000 workers filed initial claims for unemployment benefits two weeks ago.
 - The number of new claims had trending downward since March, when nearly seven million people filed for unemployment insurance in a single week. However, the numbers have spiked several times in recent weeks, amid a surge in new coronavirus cases.
 - 308,262 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.
- [*Some COVID-19 Survivors Haunted by Loss of Smell and Taste*](#), January 2
 - A minority of COVID-19 patients [suffers](#) from persistent loss of smell and taste long after they recover from the acute infection, unlike most patients, who recover their senses of smell and taste within weeks of recovery.
 - Experts warn that loss of smell, tied intimately to both taste and appetite, can lead to malnutrition and unintentional weight loss in people who lose the desire to eat or even become disgusted by food.
 - Mental health experts also worry that anosmia is a risk factor for anxiety and depression. Many individuals with persistent COVID-19 anosmia report feelings of depression, detachment, and disorientation.
 - A recent [study](#) of 153 patients in Germany found that smell training – sniffing scented oils with a variety of odors such as lavender, cinnamon, or chocolate – could be moderately helpful in coaxing back a sense of smell.

- [FDA COVID-19 Updates](#), January 4
 - Food and Drug Administration (FDA) published a [toolkit](#) to help stakeholders communicate in English and Spanish about hand sanitizer safety and use during the pandemic.
 - FDA published an [infographic](#) that provides a visualization of the wide variety of COVID-19 tests and collection kits authorized by FDA.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Coronavirus Relief Legislation Creates Substantial Changes to Copyright and Trademark Law](#), December 28
- [Bipartisan Legislation for COVID Relief Package – Summary of Key Provisions](#), December 23
- [Phase 4 Stimulus Package – Highlight of Certain Key Tax-Related Provisions in the Phase 4 Stimulus Package](#), December 22

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