

January 7, 2020

### Summary

The United States has 21,416,016 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 362,983 reported related deaths. CDC experts predict that the U.K. coronavirus variant, believed to be more contagious than other strains, will continue spreading in the United States. According to epidemiologists, the variant could cause a surge in COVID-19 cases, prolong the time to herd immunity, and cause the nation to implement further lockdowns and stricter public health measures. FDA officials advised against altering COVID-19 vaccine dosing regimes to spread limited vaccines supplies across more people, noting that proposed changes are “premature and not rooted solidly in evidence.” Operation Warp Speed launched a program to facilitate the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines through pharmacies. The vaccine rollout, which got off to a slow start, is beginning to accelerate; more vaccine doses were administered in the third week of the vaccine drive than in the first two combined.

After a dip in testing and reporting over the holidays, the U.S. COVID-19 surge continued unabated – the national seven-day new case average is higher than it has ever been – and January 6 was the deadliest day of the pandemic so far. Public health officials in Arizona said the state has become “the hot spot of the world,” and is “probably two weeks behind LA,” as new cases soared at the highest rate per day in the country over the prior week. Washington Governor Jay Inslee announced the Healthy Washington reopening plan, a phased reopening plan that will begin when current restrictions on gatherings and indoor dining expire on January 11. Georgia became the fifth state to find the more infectious variant of SARS-CoV-2 that emerged recently in the U.K.

New York reported 197 deaths, 8,548 hospitalizations, and 1,424 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, January 6, 2021. Approximately 17,636, or 7.39% of the 238,550 tests administered in New York on January 6 were positive for COVID-19. As of January 6, New York has received 934,925 doses of the vaccines and administered 311,797 doses to patients. On January 5, Governor Cuomo confirmed that a New York resident had been infected with the easily transmittable U.K. variant of COVID-19. Governor Cuomo announced that he would fine hospitals that failed to administer all of its vaccines by the end of the week. He also announced several measures designed to accelerate vaccinations as they become available to the broader public. Governor Cuomo called for the Department of Homeland Security to require all international travelers to test negative before entering the United States. New York State lawmakers are considering imposing higher taxes on the wealthy and legalizing marijuana and sports betting in an effort to boost waning tax revenues.

## Presidential updates

- [\*Operation Warp Speed Launches Program Distributing Vaccine Via Pharmacies\*](#), January 6
  - Operation Warp Speed officials announced the launch of a new federal program that will facilitate the states distributing COVID-19 vaccines via pharmacies, including Walmart, CVS, and Walgreens.
  - A few states, including Louisiana and Florida, have already begun distributing vaccines via pharmacies on their own.
  - Across the country, 40,000 pharmacy locations have enrolled to participate in the program, though only a few thousand will begin administering vaccines this week.
  - Participating pharmacies will be required to comply with state rules regarding vaccine prioritization, though Health Secretary Azar [commented](#) that verifying customers' eligibility for the vaccine will be less important than deploying the doses quickly.
  - The vaccine rollout has proceeded more slowly than planned. To date, the federal government has shipped approximately 17 million vaccine doses to the states, but the states have only administered approximately 5.3 million doses, far short of the government's goal of 20 million doses by the end of 2020.
  - However, the rollout is beginning to accelerate; states administered more first vaccine doses in the third week of the vaccine drive than in the first two combined.

## World Health Organization (WHO)

- [\*WHO COVID-19 Updates\*](#), January 7
  - China [blocked](#) the arrival of a WHO team investigating the origins of SARS-CoV-2. The arrangements had been jointly agreed with China in advance. Dr. Michael Ryan, executive director of WHO's health emergencies program, said there was an issue with visas and that the team hoped it was just a bureaucratic issue that will be resolved quickly.
  - WHO [recommends](#) two doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine within 21–28 days. The recommendation allows slightly more flexibility than recommendations by U.S. regulators, but less than new U.K. guidelines encouraging spreading initial doses more widely at the cost of provided second doses on schedule.

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

- [\*CDC Predicts Highly Transmissible Coronavirus Variant Will Spread in the United States\*](#), January 6
  - CDC experts told the press they expect “B.1.1.7”—the new coronavirus variant originally detected in the United Kingdom and believed to be highly transmissible—to continue spreading in the United States.
  - Thus far, officials have detected mostly isolated cases of B.1.1.7 in the United States. However, leader of CDC's strain surveillance program Greg Armstrong said that “assuming the data we're seeing out of the U.K. is correct—[the variant] is 50 percent more transmissible—over the next couple of months we're likely to see [an increase in the number of cases].”
  - There is no evidence that B.1.1.7 carries an increased risk of severe disease or death. Also, experts believe existing COVID-19 vaccines will be effective against B.1.1.7 and can be tweaked if necessary to respond to other virus mutations.

- Epidemiologists have warned about certain dangers relating to the spread of B.1.1.7. Since the variant is more easily transmissible, it could cause a surge in cases, driving more patients into the hospital and further taxing the country's health care system. And because of their rapid spread, more contagious diseases require a larger portion of the population to be immunized to achieve herd immunity.
- B.1.1.7 could also necessitate further and stricter public health measures, such as lockdowns. Columbia University epidemiologist Jeffrey Shaman [told](#) the press that, "If the variant starts to take over because it is more aggressive, the measures we've had in place that aren't working great to begin with are going to be less effective in controlling the virus."
- [According](#) to Johns Hopkins epidemiologist Jennifer Nuzzo, "We are in a race against time. We need to increase our speed in which we act so that we don't allow...this variant to become the dominant one in circulation. The clock is ticking."
- [\*CDC Model Indicates Asymptomatic Carriers Account for 59% of Transmission\*](#), January 7
  - CDC recently released a [model](#) indicating that 59% of all coronavirus transmission stems from asymptomatic carriers, including 35% from infected individuals who have not yet developed symptoms and 24% from individuals who never develop symptoms.
  - CDC Deputy Director for Infectious Diseases Jay Butler highlighted the study's implications for public health measures. He explained "the bottom line is controlling the COVID-19 pandemic is really going to require controlling the silent pandemic transmission from persons without symptoms. The community mitigation tools that we have need to be utilized broadly to be able to slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2 from all infected persons, at least until we have those vaccines widely available."
- [\*CDC Says Vaccine-Associated Allergic Reactions Rare\*](#), January 6
  - There have been reports of COVID-19 vaccine recipients suffering allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis, shortly after vaccine administration.
  - On Wednesday, CDC issued a [report](#) advising that the risk of vaccine-related allergic reactions is small and should not dissuade Americans from being vaccinated.
  - CDC noted that, in the first two weeks of the vaccine rollout, the states administered approximately 1.9 million vaccine doses and only 21 recipients suffered severe allergic reactions. Most of these recipients had a history of allergic reactions, and all but one of them has fully recovered.
  - CDC also opined that the risks associated with a vaccine-induced allergic reaction are far outweighed by the risks of contracting the virus, which include persistent symptoms and serious complications even among survivors, and unknown long-term consequences.
  - CDC advised that facilities administering vaccines should have the supplies necessary to treat allergic reactions and should monitor patients for 15 to 30 minutes following vaccine administration.
- [\*CDC Interpretation of Forecasts of New Deaths and Hospitalizations\*](#), January 7
  - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 36 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 an uncertain trend in new COVID-19 deaths over the next four weeks. CDC predicts that the number of cumulative COVID-19 deaths will be between 405,000 and 438,000 by January 30, 2021.
- CDC [consolidated](#) data from 12 models projecting the number of daily COVID-19 hospitalizations. The forecasts estimate 9,200 to 23,000 additional COVID-19 hospitalizations per day will be reported by February 1, 2021.

## **New York State**

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), January 7
  - New York reported 197 deaths, 8,548 hospitalizations, and 1,424 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, January 6, 2021.
  - Approximately 17,636, or 7.39% of the 238,550 tests administered in New York on January 6 were positive for COVID-19.
  - As of January 6, New York has received 934,925 doses of the vaccines and administered 311,797 doses to patients.
  - On Monday, Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that the easily transmittable U.K. variant of COVID-19 had been discovered in New York. A man associated with N. Fox Jewelers in Saratoga Springs, NY tested positive with the U.K. variant.
  - Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that he would begin fining hospitals that fail to administer their full allotment of doses by the end of the week. Health-care workers and residents and staff of long-term care facilities are currently eligible for vaccinations. Mayor de Blasio said that he accepted responsibility for the slow vaccine rollout in New York City, where about one-third of health care workers in the City's public hospitals have reported their reluctance to receive a vaccination.
  - Additionally, Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that he would install several other measures to increase the vaccine rollout in New York. The governor pledged to supplement the federal vaccination program to accelerate vaccinations in nursing homes, and would develop drive-throughs and use public facilities, churches, and other community venues to distribute the vaccine to the general public. Finally, the governor said he would propose a law to criminalize fraud relating to the distribution of the vaccine, including situations where people falsify records to skip the line, give vaccines to family, or sell the vaccines.
  - On January 6, Governor Cuomo [sent](#) a letter to Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf asking him to require all international travelers to the United States to receive a negative COVID-19 test before being allowed into the country. Roughly 120 countries impose this requirement.
  - Several New York lawmakers are [considering](#) increasing taxes on the wealthy and legalizing sports betting and marijuana in an effort to increase tax revenues. New York faces a \$8.7 billion budget deficit during the next fiscal year. To date, 25 states and the District of Columbia have legalized sports betting after a 2018 U.S. Supreme Court decision opened the door for states to legalize the practice. Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont also [announced](#) on Wednesday that he wanted to legalize sports betting and marijuana to boost tax revenues to offset pandemic losses.
  - New York [moved](#) ahead with a scheduled minimum-wage increase to \$14 per hour despite objections from certain trade groups. Lawmakers had considered delaying the scheduled increase because many businesses have struggled during the pandemic, but

ultimately decided that increasing the minimum wage would help, rather than hurt, the state's economic recovery. The increase was scheduled as part of a 2016 law to incrementally increase the minimum wage across the State except in New York City, which has its own minimum wage laws.

### **New York City**

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), January 7
  - The Independent Budget Office, a fiscal watchdog, predicted that New York City would collect \$11.3 billion less in tax revenue through FY2023. New York City residents lost nearly 878,000 jobs during the second quarter of 2020, although 20% of those jobs came back during the third quarter; the watchdog predicted that employment will continue to increase but remain below 2019 levels. Furthermore, it predicted the lowest volume of property sales since 2010 due to office vacancies. Nevertheless, the authors are optimistic that the economic recovery will accelerate in 2021.

### **Other Related Updates**

- [Second Chinese Vaccine is Effective](#), January 7
  - Brazilian officials announced that a COVID-19 vaccine made by Sinovac was effective, bolstering the chances of approval for a second inoculation out of China that could be rolled out in much of the developing world.
  - Officials from the Butantan Institute, a prominent medical institute in the state of Sao Paulo, announced the vaccine was 78% effective. The Brazilian trial included 12,476 volunteers. Researchers discussed the results at a news conference, but did not provide the data in written form. Researchers in Turkey previously [announced](#) that the vaccine had an efficacy rate of 91.25%, but that was based on preliminary results from a small clinical trial.
  - Chinese vaccine makers tested their vaccines abroad because the outbreak was largely stamped out in China by the time vaccine candidates were ready for trial.
  - The Chinese government approved another COVID-19 vaccine from state-owned company Sinopharm on December 31. Sinopharm announced that its Phase 3 trials showed an efficacy rate of 79%, but did not provide any further trial data.
- [European Union Regulators Approve Moderna Vaccine](#), January 6
  - The European Medicines Agency, the E.U. drug regulator, approved Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine on January 6, the second vaccine approved by the Union. Regulators previously approved Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine in late December.
  - The body has been criticized for taking too long to approve vaccines, as each approval has come weeks after the same vaccines were approved by U.S. and U.K. regulators.
  - E.U. regulators have not yet begun a review of AstraZeneca's vaccine, which was recently approved for use in the U.K. and in India.
- [Department of Labor Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims Report](#), January 7
  - Department of Labor (DOL) [reports](#) that another 787,000 workers filed initial claims for unemployment benefits last week.
  - The number of new claims has been trending downward since March 2020, when nearly seven million people filed for unemployment insurance in a single week.

However, the number of new claims spiked recently as new coronavirus cases surged across the country.

- 161,460 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.
- [HHS: States Can Vaccinate Lower-Priority Groups if Doses Would Otherwise Sit in Freezers](#), January 6
  - Health and Human Services Secretary Azar said that he was advising states to begin vaccinating lower-priority groups if the doses they had on hand would be sitting in freezers.
  - Allowing phases to overlap is designed to quicken the pace of vaccinations, which has failed to meet expectations.
  - Florida had already deployed this method of vaccinating, but remains in the middle of the pack in terms of vaccinations per share of the population. New Jersey's Health Commissioner said that her state would not take a rigid approach to the vaccination phases, in line with HHS' advice.
- [Convalescent Plasma Helps Prevent Disease Progression in Older Adults](#), January 6
  - Convalescent plasma with high SARS-CoV-2 antibody titers can help [prevent](#) progression to severe COVID-19 in older adults with mild disease, according to a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine.
  - The study involved 160 adults aged 65 and older in Argentina who tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 within 48 hours of developing mild COVID-19 symptoms.
  - The volunteers were randomized to receive an infusion of high-antibody-titer convalescent plasma or placebo. Infusions were given within 72 hours of symptom onset and lasted about 1.5-2 hours.
  - The primary endpoint – development of severe respiratory disease by day 15 – was roughly halved with plasma infusion (16% vs. 31%).
  - Researchers calculated that roughly seven older patients would need to be treated to prevent one case of severe respiratory illness, and an editor in *Physician's First Watch* wrote that it may be difficult to disseminate these infusions widely enough to make a significant difference in public health.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Podcast: COVID-19: End of Life Fund Issues](#), January 6
- [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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