

March 15, 2021

Summary

The United States has 29,471,008 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 535,319 reported related deaths. Last Thursday evening, which was the one-year anniversary of World Health Organization declaring the COVID-19 crisis a pandemic, President Biden projected that all Americans will be eligible for a vaccine by May 1. He also identified the July Fourth holiday as his hoped-for turning point in the battle against COVID-19. The day, he said, would “not only mark our independence as a nation, but mark our independence from this virus.”

CDC has released new statistics showing that the overwhelming majority of people in the U.S. who receive the first dose of a two-shot vaccine complete the vaccination process. CDC is also studying new data suggesting that three feet, rather than six, may be the appropriate degree of social distancing in school settings. AstraZeneca is defending its vaccine as several countries temporarily halt administration of the vaccine amid reports of blood clotting in patients who have received it. Meanwhile, more vaccines are likely on their way to market, while Eli Lilly’s combination antibody therapy significantly reduced hospitalizations and deaths among mild to moderate COVID-19 patients in a new study.

The United States’ seven-day average of newly reported COVID-19 cases fell to 54,639. The seven-day averages of new daily hospital admissions and deaths have also declined to 4,889 and 1,465, respectively. As of March 10, about 32.9 million people in the U.S. have now been fully vaccinated. Alaska and New Mexico have vaccinated the highest percentage of residents among the states, with over 15% inoculated. On March 11, CDC reported that Michigan, Florida, California, and Colorado have the highest count of emerging COVID variant cases.

New York reported 58 deaths, 4,517 hospitalizations, and 923 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on March 14. Approximately 5,807, or 4.57% of the 127,005 tests administered in New York on March 14 were positive for COVID-19. As of March 14, New York has administered 6,699,848 doses of the vaccines to patients. 22.5% of New York residents have received at least one dose of the vaccines and 11.6% are fully vaccinated. On March 12, Governor Cuomo signed legislation granting public and private employees time off to receive COVID-19 vaccines. On the same day, Governor Cuomo also committed to expanding the New York Forward Rapid Test Program, which the State first established last month. This program makes low-cost, rapid testing available to the public to support enhanced economic activity as the State continues to reopen. On March 11, New York State Assembly officials launched an impeachment investigation into Governor Cuomo for his administration’s reporting of COVID-19 deaths in State nursing homes and allegations that the governor behaved inappropriately towards female aides.

U.S. Government Updates

- [*Biden Addresses Nation after Signing into law \\$1.9 Trillion COVID-19 Relief Plan,*](#) March 11
 - Last Thursday evening, the one-year anniversary of World Health Organization declaring the COVID-19 crisis a pandemic, Biden projected that all Americans will be eligible for—i.e. able to get in line for—a vaccine by May 1.
 - Biden also identified the July Fourth holiday as his hoped-for turning point in the battle against COVID-19. The day, he said, would “not only mark our independence as a nation, but mark our independence from this virus.”
 - However, he stressed that large gathering are still a long way off. He urged Americans to continue social distancing, wearing masks, and getting vaccinated.
 - Biden also decried the racism surrounding the virus and the “vicious hate crimes against Asian Americans, who’ve been attacked, harassed, blamed and scapegoated.”
 - Finally, the President mourned the over 500,000 Americans who have died from virus, noting the number exceeds all American deaths from the World Wars, the Vietnam War, and the September 11 terrorist attack combined.

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

- [*COVID Data Tracker Weekly Review,*](#) March 12
 - CDC summarized key COVID-19 disease indicators for the previous week.
 - The number of new cases reported in the United States on March 10 was 56,586. The current seven-day average number of daily cases is 54,639. This is an 11.2% decrease compared to the previous week’s average and an overall 78.1% decrease compared to the national peak on January 11, 2021.
 - As of March 10, 95.7 million vaccine doses have been administered in the United States. Overall, approximately 62.5 million people in the United States have received at least one dose of vaccine, which is 18.8% of the population. Approximately 32.9 million people have been fully vaccinated, which is 9.9% of the population. The seven-day average number of reported vaccine dose administrations was 2.2 million, an 8% acceleration compared to the previous week.
 - The number of new hospital admissions on March 9 was 5,035, a 70.4% decrease compared the national peak on January 9, 2021. The current seven-day average of daily admissions is 4,889, a decrease of 11% compared to the prior week’s average.
 - The total number of new deaths reported on March 10 was 1,513. The current seven-day average of reported deaths is 1,465 per day, a 19.3% decrease compared to the prior week’s average.
- [*CDC Studying Data Suggesting Three Feet of Social Distancing “OK Under Certain Circumstances,”*](#) March 14
 - A new [study](#) published in the journal Clinical Infectious Diseases suggests that schools may be able to open and operate safely for in-person instruction as long as children maintain three feet of distance between them, in addition to taking other mitigation measures, such as wearing masks.
 - The study [compared](#) the incidence rates of COVID-19 cases among students and staff members in Massachusetts school districts that required at least six feet of distance to

districts that required only three feet of distance. The researchers found no statistically significant differences in infection rates between the two groups. Accordingly, the researchers concluded, lower physical distancing policies can safely be adopted in school settings, as long as universal masking and other safety measures remain in place.

- Dr. Anthony Fauci [said](#) Sunday that CDC is aware of the new study and is conducting its own research. If it comes to the same conclusion, the agency will update its guidelines accordingly, assured Fauci.
- [*COVID-19 Vaccine Second-Dose Completion and Interval Between First and Second Doses Among Vaccinated Persons*](#), March 15
 - CDC [released](#) results of a study of 12.5 million people who received the first vaccine dose and for whom sufficient time elapsed to get the second. The researchers found that 88% of people completed the series. Another 9% did not receive their second shot, but still had time to do so within the six weeks that CDC officials recommend as the maximum span between doses. About 3% did not complete the series within six weeks.

New York State

- [*New York State COVID-19 Updates*](#), March 15
 - New York reported 58 deaths, 4,517 hospitalizations, and 923 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, March 14, 2021.
 - Approximately 5,807, or 4.57% of the 127,005 tests administered in New York on March 14 were positive for COVID-19.
 - As of March 14, New York has administered 6,699,848 doses of the vaccines to patients. 22.5% of New York residents have received at least one dose of the vaccines and 11.6% are fully vaccinated.
 - On March 12, Governor Cuomo [signed](#) legislation granting public and private employees time off to receive COVID-19 vaccines. Under this law, employees are entitled to up to four hours of excused leave per injection, which their employer cannot charge against any other leave the employee has earned or accrued.
 - On March 11, New York State Assembly officials [launched](#) an impeachment investigation into Cuomo for his administration's reporting of COVID-19 deaths in State nursing homes and allegations that the governor behaved inappropriately towards female aides. Cuomo said that he will not resign over mere allegations and asked lawmakers to reserve judgment until New York State Attorney General, Letitia James, completes her investigation.
- [*Governor Cuomo Announces Expansion of New York Forward Rapid Test Program*](#), March 12
 - On March 12, Cuomo committed to expanding the New York Forward Rapid Test Program, which the State first established last month. This program makes low-cost, rapid testing available to the public to support enhanced economic activity as the State continues to reopen.
 - New York State will open 26 additional testing sites within the next week to reach an aggregate 38 sites statewide. The State will establish new sites in various locations throughout New York City, Hudson Valley, Capital Region, Western New York, and Long Island.

- The governor hopes that this program will facilitate a safer return to public gatherings, as weddings and catered events return on March 15, and arts and entertainment venues reopen on April 2.

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), March 15
 - As of March 14, New York City’s incoming Schools Chancellor, Meisha Ross Porter, is [pushing](#) to expand the City’s summer-school program to as many students as possible, including creating academic acceleration and enrichment programs. Ross Porter believes that this expansion will help students recover from educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - As of March 14, the Javits Center will no longer [function](#) as a 24-hour vaccination site. New York State Health Department commented that round-the-clock operations were only intended as a three-day pilot program. Throughout the program, the State administered nearly 41,000 vaccinations during overnight hours.
 - On March 14, New York City [held](#) a day of remembrance for COVID-19 victims on the Brooklyn waterfront. Mayor de Blasio called the total number of lives lost “a number we can barely imagine” and noted that it represents more than the City lost in World War II, the Vietnam War, September 11, and Superstorm Sandy combined.

Vaccines and Therapeutics

- [Eli Lilly’s Combination Therapy for COVID-19 Cuts Serious Illness and Death in Large Study](#), March 10
 - Eli Lilly and Co. [announced](#) that its combination antibody therapy to fight COVID-19 reduced the risk of hospitalization and death by 87% in a study of more than 750 high-risk COVID-19 patients.
 - Eli Lilly’s [study](#) is now the [second](#) large, late-stage study to show that combination therapy of two antibodies, bamlanivimab and etesevimab, is an effective treatment for patients with mild to moderate COVID-19 cases.
 - The company said that it is prepared to manufacture one million doses of the combination therapy in the coming months.
- [AstraZeneca Asserts No Link Between Vaccine, Blood Clots as More Countries Suspend Use](#), March 15
 - AstraZeneca insisted that there is no scientific evidence of any link between its COVID-19 vaccine (which is not yet [authorized](#) for use in the U.S.) and recent deaths reported in Europe from blood clots.
 - In its [statement](#), the drug-maker reported that, out of the 17 million people worldwide who have been inoculated with the vaccine it jointly produced with Oxford University, there have been only 15 cases of deep vein thrombosis and 22 pulmonary embolisms. “This is much lower than would be expected to occur naturally in a general population of this size and is similar across other licensed COVID-19 vaccines,” [said](#) the company.
 - Nevertheless, an [increasing](#) number of countries, including Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Thailand, Indonesia, Iceland, Congo, and Bulgaria, have temporarily [suspended](#) the vaccine’s use as a [precaution](#). Canada and the U.K. continue to distribute the vaccine for now.

- World Health Organization (WHO) and European Medicines Agency (EMA) have [said](#) that the available data do not suggest that the vaccine causes clots and recommend that people continue to be immunized.
- [Better COVID Vaccines Are Coming, WHO's Chief Scientist Says](#), March 15
 - Soumya Swaminathan, WHO's chief scientist, [said](#) that she believed new vaccines—including more single-shot vaccines, as well as ones that will not require needles and can be stored at room temperature—may be ready for use later this year or next year.
 - More than 80 candidate vaccines are currently being studied in people, though some are in very early stages and may not ultimately be successful. This group includes vaccines designed to thwart variants of the coronavirus that have emerged in recent months. There are also more experimental vaccines that use alternative technologies and delivery systems, including vaccines that are administered orally, via nasal spray, or through skin using a patch. These may be better suited to specific groups, such as pregnant people, said Dr. Swaminathan.
- [Facebook Announces New Labels for Coronavirus Vaccine Posts](#), March 15
 - Facebook, the world's biggest social media network, has [announced](#) that it will take new [measures](#) to limit the spread of “potentially harmful” information about vaccines, including adding labels to posts about vaccines to show additional information from WHO. Facebook, which also owns WhatsApp and Instagram, will likewise add “additional targeted labels about COVID-19 vaccine subtopics.”
 - The general label, which will be in multiple languages, will note that COVID-19 vaccines undergo tests for safety and effectiveness prior to being authorized.
 - The company will also “reduce the distribution” of content from users who have repeatedly violated Facebook's COVID-19 policies.
 - Additionally, Facebook will expand the use of official WhatsApp “chatbots” to help authorities in the United States and abroad register people for vaccines.
 - Facebook has been studying vaccine [hesitancy](#) and what might contribute to it. So far, findings show that just 10 out of 638 population segments contained 50% of all vaccine hesitancy content on the platform, evidencing how a small group plays an outsized role in pushing widespread skepticism.

International

- Three-quarters of [Italians](#) are entering another strict lockdown following a 15 percent increase in COVID-19 infections last week. Experts attribute the rise to a slow vaccine rollout and the circulation of the more contagious COVID-19 variant first found in the United Kingdom.
- [Hong Kong](#) said today that it would expand vaccine eligibility to everyone age 30 and older in a bid to increase vaccine uptake. Hong Kong has seen increasing disinterest in vaccinations following reports that six people died after receiving Sinovac's vaccine. Officials say these deaths are under investigation.
- [Russia](#)'s sovereign wealth fund said it has agreements with companies in Italy, Spain, France, and Germany to produce the country's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine. The announcement points to Russian confidence that the European Medicines Agency will soon approve the vaccine for use.

Other Updates

- [Millions Have Left the Labor Forces during Pandemic](#), March 15
 - Since March 2020, over four millions people have quit the labor force, most because of health concerns, a lack of job opportunities, and family responsibilities like child care.
 - These numbers are not reflected in the commonly cited monthly unemployment rate, which was 6.2 percent in February.
 - Economists, however, are optimistic that most of those people will return to the labor force once the concerns associated with child care or health are alleviated and once the labor market heats up.
- [Mental Health Crisis Affecting Young People Needs Immediate Attention, Report Says](#), March 15
 - [Sapiens Labs](#), a U.S. nonprofit group dedicated to understanding the human mind, surveyed about 50,000 people in eight countries about their mental health during the pandemic.
 - Over one in four respondents said they are at risk of clinical disorders. Additionally, nearly 40 percent of respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 reported “feeling sadness, distress or hopelessness, as well as unwanted, strange and obsessive thoughts.”
 - Sapiens founder Dr. Tara Thiagarajan said of the results, “The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated trends that were already there, and made them worse. Particularly, social isolation has had a larger impact on young people, and it’s pushed many of them over the edge.”
- [More U.S. Travelers Are Flying Again Despite COVID-19 Risks](#), March 14
 - Friday marked the busiest day for air travel in the United States since March 2020, with 1.36 million travelers passing through Transportation Security Administration checkpoints. This peak comes at a time when many students traditionally travel for spring break vacations.
 - Despite growing numbers of vaccinations, CDC is still advising people to “delay travel and stay home to protect yourself and others from COVID-19.”

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [IRS and DOL Issue Separate COVID-19-Related Benefit Plan Guidance for Employee Benefit Plans and Plan Participants: Take Note of Opportunities and Deadlines](#), March 2
- [Nine Key Takeaways for Providers as Illinois Returns to Phase 4 of the “Restore Illinois” Plan](#), February 11

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