

March 4, 2021

Summary

The United States has 28,808,978 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 519,867 reported related deaths. On Tuesday, President Biden said the U.S. will produce enough vaccines for every adult in the country by the end of May, cutting two months off of his earlier timeline of late July. Also on Tuesday, the Governors of Texas and Tennessee ended COVID-19 restrictions in their states, prompting criticism from Biden. In the first two weeks of the special enrollment period for health coverage through the Affordable Care Act (ACA), over 200,000 Americans signed up. After an NPR investigation found that San Francisco-based One Medical has administered COVID-19 vaccines to people who are currently ineligible to receive them, the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis launched an investigation into the company's practices.

CDC launched a new platform to assist people in finding available vaccine appointments. CDC also released new information concerning the presence of the Brazil variant in the United States. Johnson & Johnson has partnered with Merck to help Johnson & Johnson produce its vaccine, which was recently authorized for emergency use. New research shows that convalescent plasma intervention is not effective in treating mild to moderate COVID-19 patients.

In the United States, reported COVID-19 cases have leveled off to an average of 65,000 – 70,000 cases each day. As of March 3, New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island lead the nation in recent cases per capita. South Florida continues to struggle with new COVID-19 infections—with around 1,200 cases each day in Miami-Dade County. However, the country continues to increase the pace of vaccination (administering close to 2,000,000 doses daily). As of March 3, Alaska, New Mexico, and South Dakota report the highest vaccination rates.

New York reported 60 deaths, 5,177 hospitalizations, and 1,043 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, March 3. Approximately 7,593, or 2.81% of the 270,089 tests administered in New York on March 3 were positive for COVID-19. As of March 3, New York has received 3,375,540 first doses of the vaccines and administered 3,231,841 first doses to patients. New York State has received 2,139,720 second doses of the vaccines and administered 1,727,394 second doses to patients. The State will launch a new pilot program to facilitate administration of Johnson & Johnson's single-dose vaccine to eligible residents. The State will continue to test the Excelsior Pass (a secure technology used to confirm an individual's vaccination or recent negative COVID-19 test) during events at Madison Square Garden and Barclays Center. Beginning April 2, events, arts, and entertainment venues can reopen at 33% capacity, with a maximum of 100 people indoors and 200 people outdoors. The State has approved increased capacity if all attendees present proof of a negative COVID-19 test prior to entry.

U.S. Government Updates

- [*Biden Says U.S. Will Have Enough Vaccines for All Adults by May*](#), March 2
 - On Tuesday, Biden said the U.S. will produce enough vaccines for every adult in the country by the end of May. The President’s announcement cuts two months off of his earlier timeline of late July.
 - “We’re now on track to have enough vaccine supply for every adult in America by the end of May,” he said, crediting his administration’s push to increase vaccine production and distribution.

- [*Biden Excoriates States for Lifting COVID-19 Restrictions*](#), March 3
 - After the [governors](#) of Texas and Tennessee on Tuesday ended COVID-19 restrictions in their states, Biden called the decisions “Neanderthal.” “The last thing—the last thing—we need is the Neanderthal thinking that . . . everything’s fine, take off your mask. Forget it. It still matters,” Biden told reporters.
 - The two governors’ orders end mask requirements and allow businesses to operate at full capacity. Both pointed to falling infections rates and advancements in COVID-19 treatments to [rationalize](#) their decisions.
 - Some [companies](#), including Target, Starbucks, CVS, and Kroger, plan to keep their mask rules in place in stores throughout Texas and Tennessee.

- [*Congress Investigating Medical Provider’s Vaccines Practices*](#), March 2
 - After an NPR investigation found that San Francisco-based One Medical has administered COVID-19 vaccines to people who are currently ineligible to receive them, the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis launched an investigation into the company’s practices.
 - In a letter to One Medical, subcommittee chairman James Clyburn explained, “Despite being warned that the company’s lax oversight of vaccine eligibility rules was allowing ineligible patients to jump the line, One Medical has reportedly failed to properly implement an effective protocol to verify eligibility and instructed staff not to police eligibility.” The letter demanded One Medical produce documents and information to the government by March 15.
 - On February 24, NPR [reported](#) that One Medical inoculated people with connections to the company’s leaders and customers of its high-end concierge medical service that were ineligible for the vaccines.
 - One Medical customers pay an annual fee to receive “easy online access to appointments, telemedicine and access to a streamlined, tech-focused medical experience.” Because of the fee, its clientele tends to be relatively affluent.
 - One Medical responded to the probe by stating, “We remain dedicated to lending our time and resources to providing equitable and accessible care for those communities we serve, and are confident that we will be able to clear up these misunderstandings.”

- [*200,000 Americans Sign Up for Health Insurance During Special Enrollment Period*](#), March 3
 - On February 15, the Biden administration opened a special enrollment period for health coverage through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to “give Americans that need health care coverage during this global pandemic the opportunity to sign up.”

- In the first two weeks of the period, more than 200,000 Americans signed up for coverage.

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

- [*CDC Interpretation of Forecasts of New Deaths and Hospitalizations*](#), March 3
 - 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 4,400 and 12,900 new deaths and between 540,000 and 564,000 cumulative deaths by March 27.
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 13 models projecting the number of daily COVID-19 hospitalizations. The models predict daily hospitalizations will likely decrease over the next four weeks. The forecasts estimate between 1,900 and 10,000 new confirmed COVID-19 hospitalizations per day by March 29.
- [*CDC Launches Vaccine Finder*](#), March 2
 - In many parts of the country, getting appointments for COVID-19 vaccinations remains a problem. To help streamline the vaccination process, CDC has [launched](#) a centralized [system](#), called Vaccine Finder, to track supply and determine what locations are administering vaccines.
 - Other tech platforms, including [GoodRx](#), have also stepped up efforts to create sites to track vaccines and appointment.
- [*First Identified Cases of SARS-CoV-2 Variant P.1 in the United States*](#), March 3
 - CDC [released](#) new analysis detailing the spread of the P.1 Variant (Brazil variant).
 - The first case of the Brazil variant in the U.S. was discovered on January 25, 2021 in Minnesota. They were detected by Minnesota Department of Health, which has been [screening](#) 100 specimens per week to surveil the COVID-19 virus and its variants since December 2020.
 - The Minnesota resident became symptomatic in early January and was hospitalized for nine days. The person reported having traveled to southeastern Brazil within the 14 days before symptom onset. The person’s travel companion, who lived in the same household, was later confirmed to also have the Brazil variant.
 - In addition to these two cases in Minnesota, one Brazil variant case has been reported in each of the following states: Alaska, Florida, Maryland, and Oklahoma.
 - There is some [evidence](#) that the Brazil variant has an increased ability, compared to the original virus, to re-infect people who have already recovered from COVID-19.

New York State

- [*New York State COVID-19 Updates*](#), March 4
 - New York reported 60 deaths, 5,177 hospitalizations, and 1,043 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, March 3, 2021.
 - Approximately 7,593, or 2.81% of the 270,089 tests administered in New York on March 3 were positive for COVID-19.

- As of March 3, New York has received 3,375,540 first doses of the vaccines and administered 3,231,841 first doses to patients. As of March 3, New York has received 2,139,720 second doses of the vaccines and administered 1,727,394 second doses to patients.
 - On March 3, Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that travelers to New York State will not be required to quarantine upon arrival if they visit within 90 days of their full vaccination.
 - Beginning on March 5, New York State will [establish](#) three temporary mass-vaccination centers at Marist College, SUNY Genesee Community College, and Jamestown Community College – Olean Campus. The sites will administer Johnson & Johnson’s vaccine and aim to inoculate, in the aggregate, nearly 10,500 people.
 - Beginning on April 2, events, arts, and entertainment venues can [reopen](#) at 33% capacity, with a maximum of 100 people indoors and 200 people outdoors. If all attendees present proof of a negative COVID-19 test prior to entry, then capacity can increase to 150 people indoors and 500 people outdoors.
 - Beginning on March 22, New York State will [allow](#) residential gatherings of up to 25 people to be held outdoors. Indoor residential gatherings remain capped at 10 people.
- [*Governor Cuomo Announces Pilot Program to Begin Administering Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine at State-Run Mass Vaccination Sites*](#), March 2
 - New York will launch a new pilot program to facilitate administration of Johnson & Johnson’s single-dose vaccine to eligible New York State residents beginning March 4.
 - The pilot program will take place at Yankee Stadium, Javits Center, and New York State Fair Site.
 - To ensure an efficient and streamlined administration of the vaccines, the sites will administer Johnson & Johnson doses separately from the other vaccines at these sites. Specifically, the sites will administer the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines during the day and switch to the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at night—making these sites the first 24-hour vaccination centers in the State.

New York City

- [*New York City COVID-19 Updates*](#), March 4
 - On March 3, a coalition of City Council members [spoke out](#) against a New York City policy requiring public schools to return funding if their enrollment dropped due to COVID-19. Under the policy, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) required some schools to repay as much as \$600,000, even if they had allocated the money to hire additional teachers and cover other pandemic-related costs. While NYCDOE recently announced a 25% reduction in the proposed clawbacks, New York City Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza said that the repayments are needed to assist schools that have the poorest students—claiming that any further reduction will only benefit privileged schools. However, after conducting their own analysis of the program, the coalition of City Council members argues that low-income students will be disproportionately affected by the policy, not aided as the Chancellor claimed.
 - As of March 2, City health officials [confirmed](#) that two New York City residents have been infected with the B.1.526 COVID variant (first identified in South Africa). Additionally, City health officials have identified 58 additional cases of the U.K. COVID variant—bringing the City’s current total to 116 confirmed cases.

Vaccines and Therapeutics

- [Merck to Produce J&J Vaccines](#), March 2
 - Within days of Johnson & Johnson receiving an emergency use authorization for its new vaccine, the pharmaceutical company [entered](#) an agreement to partner with an industry [rival](#), Merck, to jointly manufacture the vaccine.
 - The White House helped broker the deal, including invoking the Defense Production Act to help Merck access the materials and equipment to immediately begin manufacturing the vaccine at two of its facilities.
 - The deal will likely prevent Johnson & Johnson from falling behind in its vaccine production and allow the company to fulfill its promise of 20 million doses of the single-shot vaccine by the end of the month. Overall, Johnson & Johnson is slated to produce over 100 million doses for the U.S. and 500 million globally through World Health Organization's COVAX program.
- [NIH Halts Trial of COVID-19 Convalescent Plasma in Emergency Department Patients with Mild Symptoms](#), March 2
 - National Institutes of Health (NIH) [announced](#) that it has halted a clinical trial evaluating the safety and effectiveness of convalescent plasma, also known as "survivor's plasma," as a treatment for emergency department patients with mild to moderate COVID-19.
 - Data showed that, although not harmful to patients, convalescent plasma intervention provided no benefit.
 - Researchers had hoped that the treatment, which introduces antibodies into patients' immune systems, would decrease the likelihood of further emergency or urgent care, hospitalization, or death. Unfortunately, the study demonstrated no significant differences between patients who received the treatment and those who did not.

International

- [Italy](#) blocked a shipment of AstraZeneca vaccines from being exported to Australia on Thursday. The move comes after the European Union enacted a new regulation that allows member states to keep any doses made within the bloc but set to be shipped elsewhere if the vaccine manufacturer has not yet met its supply obligations to the member country.
- The [European Union](#)'s drug regulator will commence a review of the Russian-developed Sputnik V vaccine.
- Sinopharm, the [Chinese](#) company manufacturing two COVID-19 vaccines, has said it can produce up to three billion doses this year, tripling the company's earlier estimates.
- Bharat Biotech, an [Indian](#) drug company, said Wednesday that early data from clinical trials shows its COVID-19 vaccine, Covaxin, is 81% effective. The results are not yet peer-reviewed.
- Central and Eastern [Europe](#) is seeing rising infection rates driven by more contagious COVID-19 variants and relaxed pandemic restrictions.
- [Interpol](#) has said that police in China and South Africa have seized thousands of fake COVID-19 vaccine doses. The organization said these seizures are likely the "tip of the iceberg" in terms of vaccine fraud.

- [Several countries](#), including the United Kingdom, Canada, and Singapore, have announced they will not require “full-blown clinical studies” for existing COVID-19 vaccines that are modified to target new variants, since the vaccines are not “an entirely novel product.”

Other Updates

- [Department of Labor Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims Report](#), March 4
 - Department of Labor (DOL) reports that another 745,000 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. However, claims began spiking again around December. They are now decreasing once again.
 - 436,696 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.
- [California Will Direct 40 Percent of New Vaccines to Low-Income Communities](#), March 3
 - On Wednesday, California Governor Gavin Newsome announced the state will channel 40% of new vaccine doses to low-income communities.
 - Officials said the strategy represents “an effort to make the vaccine rollout more equitable and to reduce the number of counties considered most at risk, as well as to speed California’s ability to reopen.” Once 400,000 additional doses are distributed in the targeted communities, the state will ease restrictions there. Officials expect this could happen in as soon as two weeks.
 - The targeted communities are defined using an index that considers income, education, transportation, and housing availability.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Amendment to D.C. False Claims Act Will Allow Tax Actions, Enhancing Tax Enforcement in the District](#), March 4
- [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

Send questions to:

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