

Officials Stress That the Pandemic 'Is Not Over Yet' as U.S. Vaccinations Begin

Last Updated Jan. 4, 2021, 5:16 a.m. ET

The Trump administration is working on a deal that would enable Pfizer to make additional shots for Americans early next year. A surge of infections in Sweden is fueling criticism of the government.

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Here's what you need to know:

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- [How good is that mask you're wearing? You may soon find out.](#)
- ['It doesn't get better than this,' N.Y.C.'s mayor says as Elmhurst Hospital workers are vaccinated.](#)
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- [A happy surprise as vaccine vials turn out to hold more than thought.](#)
- [Chris Christie, reflecting on his own coronavirus experience, releases a video urging people to wear masks.](#)

With 244,365 new cases reported in a single day, the U.S. enters new territory.

Officials across the United States on Wednesday reported the highest daily number for new coronavirus since the pandemic began, as well as the most deaths in a single day.

New infections were put at 244,365, and deaths at 3,607 — nearly 500 more than the record set only a week ago. The previous case record, 236,800, was set last Friday (though a reporting anomaly in Texas made it appear still higher.)

The latest figures capped day on which health experts warned Americans, buoyed by the rollout of a vaccination campaign, that it is far too soon to abandon common-sense precautions for halting the spread of the virus.

The first shots of a vaccine made by Pfizer and BioNTech were administered on Monday, and another vaccine, made by Moderna, is expected to receive emergency authorization from the Food and Drug Administration this week.

Both were highly effective in preventing Covid-19 in clinical trials, but it will be months before a broad-enough swath of the population can be vaccinated. Officials are also scrambling to combat skepticism about the vaccines.

“As wonderful as this is, because it’s been an extraordinary manifestation of the fruits of science done in a very rapid way, it’s also bittersweet,” Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, said of the country’s split-screen reality on “CBS This Morning” on Wednesday.

As the doses are distributed throughout the states, the virus continues to engulf the country. The death toll passed 300,000 in the United States on Monday, more than any other country, just as the first injections of the vaccine were going into the arms of frontline health care workers. Nearly 3,000 new deaths were reported on Tuesday, while new cases exceeded 200,000. The seven-day average of new cases is up 28 percent from two weeks ago.

Hospitalizations have surpassed 112,000, and I.C.U. units in some areas are close to capacity.

“We should celebrate the fact that the science has come through,” Dr. Fauci said, “but it is not over yet. We have a ways to go. We have to abide by the public health measures that we talk about all the time.”

Those public health measures, of course, include social distancing, wearing masks, avoiding travel and indoor gatherings and frequent hand washing. Dr. Fauci called them “the bridge to get to the vaccine, which is going to get us out of this.”

Then there is the question of persuading people to take a vaccine. Dr. Fauci noted that some people are hesitant because of the speed with which the vaccines were developed. But he argued that the speed was a reflection of “extraordinary scientific advances in vaccine platform technology” and enormous investment.

“We hope that the overwhelming percentage of the population will accept the vaccine,” he said. (In an interview with the Vox podcast “Today, Explained” on Tuesday, Dr. Fauci said that he hoped that as many as 85 percent of Americans would get it.)

“If we do that, we will get a veil, or an umbrella, of herd immunity over the population that would dramatically diminish the dynamics of the outbreak. When we do that, then that would be the end of this outbreak. So it’s going to take months to do, but we certainly are on the right track.”

Adm. Brett P. Giroir, who heads up national testing efforts, also stressed the need to continue protective measures on Wednesday, urging Americans to wear masks and avoid travel and crowds over the holidays.

He noted that the Midwest appeared to have turned a corner as case rates improve. But outbreaks continue to escalate in the Northeast, the South and on the West Coast.

“We are still at a dangerous and critical part of this pandemic and tens of thousands of American lives are at stake really every week,” he said on CNN’s “New Day,” even as “the end of the pandemic is in sight.”

“But until we get a few more months down the road, do your best. Save lives, save American lives, save global lives, just by doing these simple measures. If you do that, we’re going to be in really good shape. But if you don’t, we’re going to have thousands of more casualties in this country that we can avoid.”

Late Wednesday, officials said that the U.S. interior secretary, David Bernhardt, had tested positive for the virus. An agency spokesman, Nicholas Goodwin, said in statement that the Mr. Bernhardt “is currently asymptomatic” and in isolation.

The secretary learned he had tested positive ahead of a cabinet meeting at the White House and did not attend, an administration official said. The Interior Department has canceled its holiday party, which had been scheduled for Thursday.

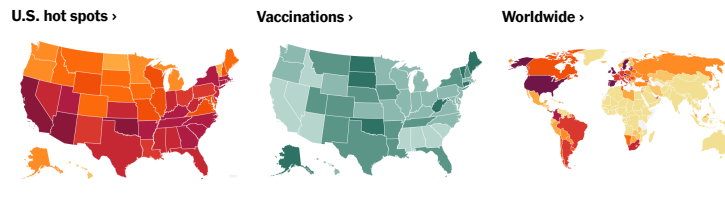
— *Karen Zraick*

Tracking the Coronavirus >

United States >	On Jan. 13	14-day change
New cases	230,476	+34% ↗
New deaths	3,922	+45% ↗

Where cases per capita are **highest**

- ↗ Ariz.
- ↗ Calif.
- ↗ Okla.
- ↗ Utah
- ↗ R.I.
- ↗ Mass.
- ↗ Ark.
- ↗ Ga.
- ↗ Tenn.
- ↗ S.C.
- ↗ Ky.
- ↗ Conn.



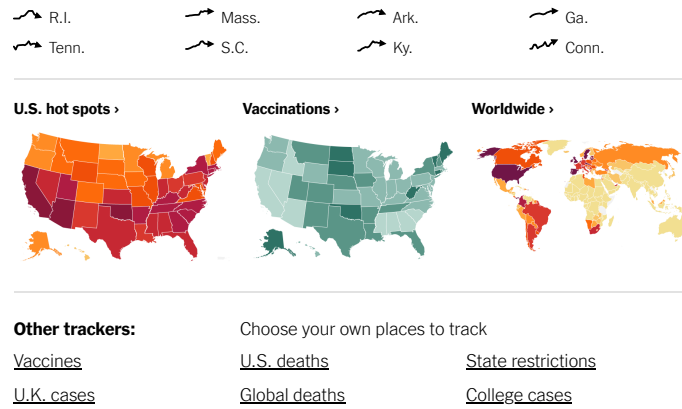
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How good is that mask you're wearing? You may soon find out.

More than 100,000 face masks have hit the market. They come in a variety of colors, designs and materials. They are a pandemic necessity. But what they don't come with is a label that says how well they block infectious particles — a fundamental omission that has frustrated public health officials.

That could soon change, however. A set of federal standards for minimum filter efficiency and labels indicating which products meet them are being developed for the bewildering marketplace for masks and other face coverings.

Guidelines are expected to be made public in January, after months without federal oversight of the quality of the masks and face coverings that have become critical to the fight to prevent the spread of the virus. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has been creating guidelines with the industry standards organization, ASTM International (formerly the American Society for Testing and Materials). The institute is a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“By having a standard in place you will be able to know what level of protection is being achieved and you'll have a consistent way of evaluating these products,” said Maryann D'Alessandro, director of the institute's National Personal Protective Technology Laboratory.

The Food and Drug Administration released an emergency measure in April, noting that it would not take action against companies selling masks to the general public. Although the agency warned that some products “may or may not meet fluid barrier or filtration efficiency levels,” the warning did little to disturb the market.

“The F.D.A. could have issued a guidance that masks should be fitted, at least two layers of cloth, not made of stretchy materials, etc. Instead, there was a free-for-all,” said Diana Zuckerman, president of the National Center for Health Research, a nonprofit health policy group.

The C.D.C. has updated its guidance on masks on numerous occasions, pointing out that tightly woven, multilayered fabric offers better protection than single-layer, loosely knit masks.

Members of a standards development working group of federal and industry officials have suggested manufacturers adopt one high and one lower filtration requirement for masks. This would give a measure of a product's efficiency in filtering particles measuring 0.3 microns, generally the most penetrative particles, which are standard for the institute's tests. “Breathability” is also another standard members are suggesting to rate masks and face coverings.

In order to display on mask packaging that the contents meet the ASTM standard, manufacturers must have their products tested by an accredited laboratory and show that their masks provide a reasonable fit to the population at large. There's no enforcement mechanism, however.

“What we have here is a really good standard,” said Dale Pfriem, president of Protective Equipment Consulting Services and a member of the standards development working group addressing mask guidelines. “Manufacturers will have something to design their products to, and something to put in their marketing materials and packaging, and consumers will have a sense of confidence.”

— *Sheila Kaplan*

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'It doesn't get better than this,' N.Y.C.'s mayor says as Elmhurst Hospital workers are vaccinated.

At the height of the pandemic in New York City, as hospitals filled and deaths mounted, Elmhurst Hospital in Queens bore the brunt of the crisis. A public hospital near the neighborhoods hit hardest by the coronavirus in the spring, Elmhurst quickly became overrun with patients and ran short of beds, equipment and staff.

On Wednesday morning, the hospital entered a new, brighter phase, when two employees became Elmhurst's first to receive a Covid-19 vaccine.

The employees — Veronica Delgado, a lead physician assistant in the hospital's emergency department, and William Kelly, who works in environmental services — both said they were thrilled.

"I don't know a health care worker in this hospital who doesn't want the vaccine immediately," Ms. Delgado, 65, said.

A room full of city employees and hospital workers applauded as the shots were administered.

"This is a standing ovation," Mayor Bill de Blasio said as he looked on. "It doesn't get better than this."

Since the city's first vaccinations outside a clinical trial took place at another Queens hospital, more than 1,600 health care workers have received a first dose, Mr. de Blasio said.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said on Wednesday that the state had received 87,750 doses of the Pfizer vaccine so far, with 80,000 additional ones expected in the coming days for nursing home residents and employees. He said the state expected 346,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine once it was federally authorized.

Mr. Cuomo also said that he expected the state would likely move into its second phase of vaccine distribution, targeting essential workers and high-risk members of the public, by late January.

In preparation, the state would direct insurers to cover the costs of vaccination. Federal officials working as part of Operation Warp Speed — the multiagency effort to quickly make a coronavirus vaccine available to Americans — have also said their goal was to make vaccines free for all Americans.

"In New York State, no person will pay a penny for a vaccination," Mr. Cuomo said.

Both Mr. Cuomo and Mr. de Blasio have cheered the vaccine as a positive development at a time when more people have been testing positive and growing ill in New York City, which both officials have warned could lead to another shutdown. However, Mr. Cuomo, not the mayor, has the power to impose a shutdown.

Mr. de Blasio said that over the last week, an average of 5.71 percent of the city's coronavirus tests were coming back positive, a rate that was "higher than we want it to be."

"Hospitalizations keep increasing, and I'm worried about that," the mayor said on Wednesday.

Mr. Cuomo also said that the rise in hospitalizations was troubling, particularly in areas upstate. To address the issue, the state's health commissioner sent a letter to hospitals directing them to start "crisis management mode" and directing overburdened hospitals to shift patients to facilities that have available beds. Statewide, hospitalizations topped 6,000, Mr. Cuomo said. The figure peaked in April when the state neared 19,000 hospitalizations.

The strategy was reminiscent of one needed in the city's hospitals in the spring, when Elmhurst Hospital was reaching capacity but thousands of hospital beds were available in facilities elsewhere.

Officials maintained on Wednesday that the city's hospitals were prepared to handle the surge, including at Elmhurst.

Dr. Mitchell Katz, the head of Health and Hospitals, the agency that oversees the city's public hospitals, said there were just 280 patients in them now who have the virus, compared with nearly 4,000 patients at the peak in the spring.

Elmhurst was particularly hard hit. On one day in late March, it saw 13 virus-related deaths in 24 hours. Hundreds of patients were arriving seeking help; some of them were found dead in rooms. A medical worker at the hospital described the conditions as "apocalyptic."

"One of the toughest battles anywhere in the United States against the coronavirus happened right here," Mr. de Blasio said on Wednesday.

Dr. Katz said that he expected to have every employee at Elmhurst vaccinated within three weeks. Ms. Delgado, after receiving her shot, urged the mayor and city officials to make it happen quickly.

She also had a message to the public: Don't be afraid of the vaccine, and don't "get information off of Facebook."

— *Michael Gold*

After personal threats over a local mask mandate, the Dodge City, Kansas, mayor resigns.

The emails Joyce Warshaw received as mayor of Dodge City, Kan., were hostile enough last month, when the city was merely considering passing a mask mandate.

But then the mandate was passed, and USA Today ran an article last week about Dodge City's struggles with the coronavirus — and the hostility just boiled over, Ms. Warshaw said.

"We're coming to get you," read one message. "You'll burn in hell," said another. The word "murder" was used several times, she said.

Fearing for her family's safety and her own, Ms. Warshaw, 69, resigned as mayor on Tuesday, a few weeks before the end of her one-year term.

"I can get past words," Ms. Warshaw, a retired elementary school principal, said in an interview on Wednesday. "But I think right now our nation is seeing so much divisiveness and so much inappropriate bullying that is accepted, and it just worried me. I don't know if these people would act out on their words."

Ms. Warshaw's experience provides a stark example of the challenges that public officials have had to navigate amid the emotional and political battle over the virus. Leaders of local and state health departments have faced harassment, personal insults and death threats over their roles in imposing virus restrictions. Political leaders have also come under fire.

Prosecutors accused a man in Wichita, Kan., of threatening to kidnap and kill that city's mayor over a mask ordinance. And the mayor of Kansas City, Mo., received a text message that referred to him using a racial slur and suggested he should be lynched for requiring masks. Council members in Green Bay, Wis., said they received threats over their mask mandates, and the superintendent of a school district in Arizona resigned amid claims that he had been harassed over the decision to move to virtual learning.

Ms. Warshaw said she understood that people may disagree, but she was disheartened by the lack of civility. Even when she tried to explain things to critics, they would dismiss her and tell her she was lying, she said. She hopes that her resignation might help some of the anger over the mask mandate the city passed in response to Ford County's decision to opt out of the state mask order.

One in seven residents in that county have tested positive for the virus since the pandemic began, making it one of the hardest-hit counties in the country. Several of Ms. Warshaw's relatives, including her daughter, have contracted the virus, and her aunt died from Covid-19, she said.

"If all of us could have a little compassion for society as a whole instead of looking at our individual want or belief," Ms. Warshaw said, "we could have curbed this pandemic earlier."

— *John Eligon*

2 Alaska health care workers had allergic reactions to the vaccine.

Two health care workers at the same hospital in Alaska developed reactions just minutes after receiving the new coronavirus vaccine this week. One was expected to remain hospitalized until Thursday.

Health officials said that the cases would not disrupt their vaccine rollout plans and that they were sharing the information for the sake of transparency.

The first worker, a middle-aged woman who had no history of allergies, had an anaphylactic reaction that began 10 minutes after she received the vaccine at Bartlett Regional Hospital in Juneau on Tuesday, a hospital official said. She experienced a rash over her face and torso, shortness of breath and an elevated heart rate.

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