

U.S. COVID-19 vaccine rollout nears 1 million doses per day

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(HealthDay)—One month after the United States began what has become a troubled rollout of a national COVID vaccination campaign, the effort is finally gathering real steam.

Close to a million doses—over 951,000, to be more exact—made their way into the arms of Americans in the past 24 hours, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Wednesday. That's the largest number of shots given in one day since the rollout began and a big jump from the previous day, when just under 340,000 doses were given, *CBS News* reported.

That number is likely to jump quickly after the federal government on Tuesday gave states the OK to vaccinate anyone over 65 and said it would release all the doses of [vaccine](#) it has available for distribution. Meanwhile, a number of states have now opened mass vaccination sites in an effort to get larger numbers of people inoculated, *CBS News* reported.

But even with the recent pickup in vaccinations, more than two-thirds of the doses sent to states have yet to be administered. As of Wednesday, nearly 29.4 million doses had been shipped to all 50 states and all U.S. territories. Of those, just 10.3 million—about 30%—had actually been used, CDC data shows.

The urgency of the vaccination campaign began even more apparent on Wednesday after scientists at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center reported they have spotted a new [coronavirus](#) variant that carries a mutation identical to a more infectious variant already reported in the U.K., but it likely arose in the United States. The researchers also reported the emergence of another U.S. variant that has acquired three more gene mutations not previously seen together in the virus. The findings are under review for publication in *BioRxiv*, an online repository of research that has not yet been peer-reviewed.

While the new variant has only been seen in one patient from Ohio, the evolving variant with the three new mutations became the dominant virus in Columbus between late December and January, the researchers said.

"This new Columbus strain has the same genetic backbone as earlier cases we've studied, but these three mutations represent a significant evolution," study leader Dr. Dan Jones, vice chair of the division of molecular pathology at Ohio State, said in a university news release.

"The big question is whether these mutations will render vaccines and current therapeutic approaches less effective," added Peter Mohler, study co-author and chief scientific officer at Wexner. "At this point, we have no data to believe that these mutations will have any impact on the effectiveness of vaccines now in use."

All Americans over 65 should get COVID vaccine: Trump administration

U.S. Health Secretary Alex Azar said Tuesday that the federal government would now release all available vaccine doses and told states to vaccinate every American over 65.

"This next phase reflects the urgency of the situation we face," he said. "Every vaccine dose that is sitting in a warehouse rather than going into an arm could mean one more life lost or one more hospital bed occupied."

A third coronavirus vaccine may soon join the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines that have already been approved for emergency use: Johnson & Johnson said Tuesday that it plans to announce trial results on its one-dose vaccine soon, though the company probably won't be able to provide as many doses this spring as it first promised the federal

government because of production delays, *The New York Times* reported.

If the vaccine can strongly protect people, as some scientists expect, only one shot would be required, making it far easier for local health departments and clinics to vaccinate residents. Its vaccine can also stay stable in a refrigerator for months, whereas the other two vaccines have to be frozen, the *Times* reported.

Dr. Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer for the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, said state health officials were clearly excited about Johnson & Johnson's one-dose vaccine.

"You can get it and you're done," he said. "Everybody is eager to have it out there. It has a lot of potential."

But the hope of a third vaccine that can guard against COVID-19 infection is dampened by production lags. In the company's \$1 billion contract with the [federal government](#), Johnson & Johnson pledged to have 12 million doses ready by the end of February, ramping up to a total of 100 million doses by the end of June, the *Times* reported.

However, federal officials have been told that the company has fallen as much as two months behind the original production schedule and won't catch up until the end of April, when it was supposed to have delivered more than 60 million doses, two people familiar with the situation who were not authorized to discuss it publicly told the *Times*.

Even if Johnson & Johnson's vaccine pans out, it won't be enough to completely quell the pandemic, Plescia told the *Times*. He predicted that state health departments would need a total of four vaccines available in the next six months if they hope to reach their goals of offering a vaccine to every American who wants one.

More infectious COVID variant now seen in 12 states

The more contagious coronavirus variant that has brought Britain to its knees in recent weeks is showing signs that it is spreading widely throughout the United States, health officials and experts say.

Wisconsin and Maryland joined Minnesota, Indiana, Texas, Pennsylvania and Connecticut, California, Florida, New York, Georgia and Colorado this week with reports of variant cases, the CDC reported Wednesday. A total of 76 variant cases have now been reported in the United States.

The New Mexico Department of Health did announce on Wednesday that it has confirmed its first case of the British variant. The male patient had traveled to the U.K. in December, the health department noted. A South African variant that is also more contagious hasn't been spotted anywhere in the United States yet.

The CDC said its strain surveillance program is on track to more than double the number of genomic sequences being uploaded to public databases by the end of the week.

"The general consensus is there's no single variant driving current U.S. cases. That said, we need to be on the lookout for these variants of concern," Duncan MacCannell, chief science officer with the CDC's Office of Advanced Molecular Detection, told the *Washington Post* this week.

Other scientists agree.

"We don't see any evidence of a particular variant 'outrunning' others," Kristian Andersen, an immunologist at the Scripps Research Institute, told the *Post*. "That's not to say there isn't one, but we haven't seen any

evidence of it so far and we are looking, just not enough."

Andersen said the British and South African variants will likely become dominant in the United States within months. "Our mitigation efforts are woefully insufficient to deal with those," he warned.

While the variants show no signs of being more deadly than the original version of the virus, they could send more people into hospitals, up the number of COVID-19 deaths, and prolong the effort to reach herd immunity in this country, the *Post* reported.

"We are in a race against time," Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist with the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in Baltimore, told the *Post*. "We need to increase our speed in which we act so that we don't allow this virus to spread further and allow this [British] variant to become the dominant one in circulation. The clock is ticking."

A global scourge

By Thursday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 23.1 million while the death toll passed 384,800, according to a *Times* tally. On Thursday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with over 2.8 million cases; Texas with over 2 million cases; Florida with more than 1.5 million cases; New York with over 1.2 million cases; and Illinois with more than 1 million cases.

Curbing the spread of the coronavirus in the rest of the world remains challenging.

In India, the coronavirus case count was over 10.5 million by Thursday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had over 8.2 million cases and nearly 206,000 deaths as of Thursday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 92.4 million on Thursday, with nearly 2 million deaths recorded, according to the Hopkins tally.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the new [coronavirus](#).

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