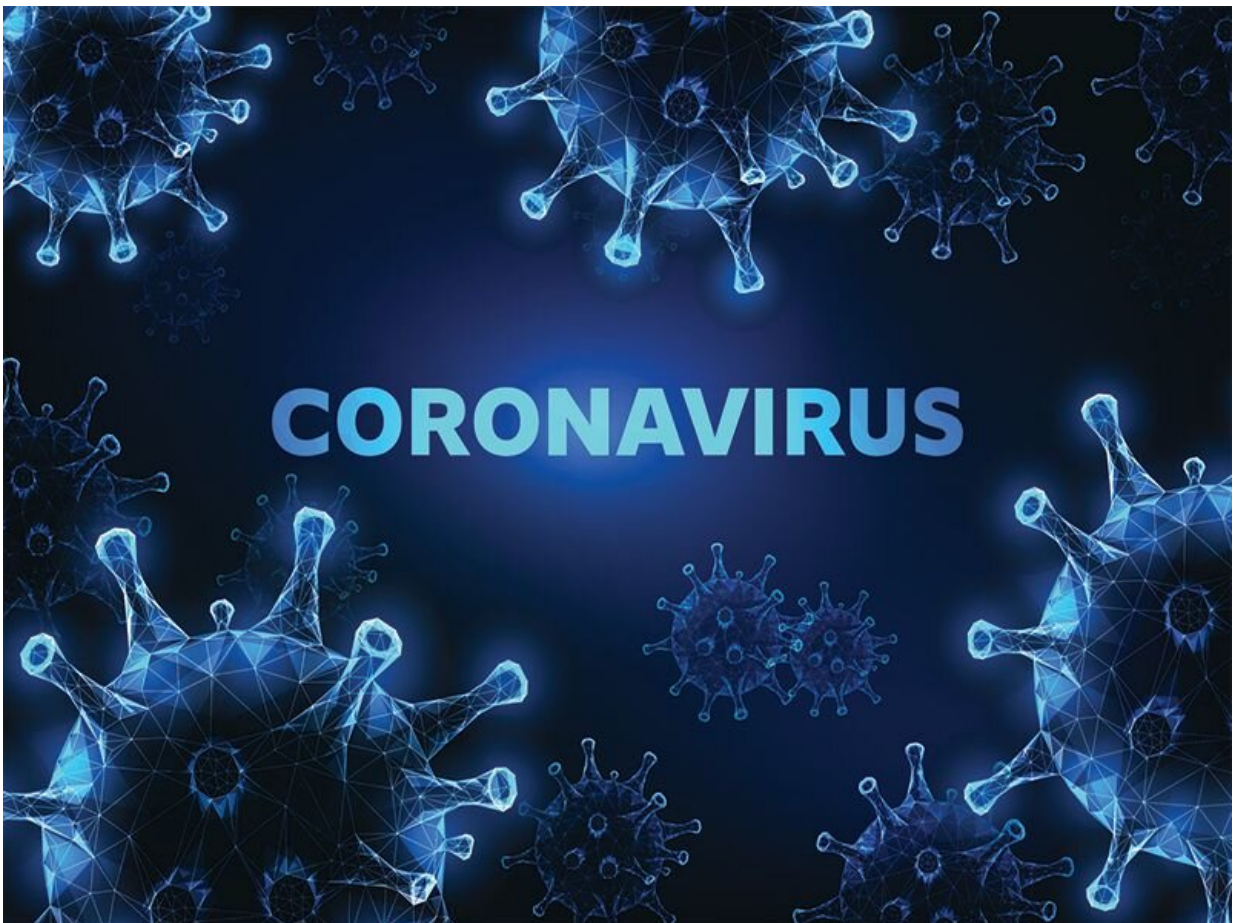


U.K. COVID variant may be more lethal, and could become dominant U.S. strain by March

February 16 2021, by Ernie Mundell and Robin Foster



(HealthDay)—Even as efforts to vaccinate Americans gain steam, more

evidence has emerged that suggests a coronavirus variant already known to spread faster is also likely to be more deadly.

The B.1.1.7 variant, which is thought to have originated in Britain, is already firmly entrenched in America and could soon become the dominant strain, according to Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Speaking Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation," she said "we know now that, or we estimate now that about 4% of disease in this country is related to B.1.1.7," she said. "And we have projections that it may be the dominant strain by the end of March."

Her warning came on the heels of research released by British scientists that shows B.1.1.7 might be more likely to trigger more lethal cases of COVID-19.

As reported Saturday by *The New York Times*, the new study was posted Friday on a U.K. government website. The scientists stressed that, as has always been the case, the vast majority of COVID-19 cases are not fatal, and their new research is based on only a small proportion of deaths in Britain.

Still, "the overall picture is one of something like a 40 to 60 percent increase in hospitalization risk, and risk of death," Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist and [scientific adviser](#) to the British government, told the *Times* on Saturday.

B.1.1.7 is known to have spread to at least 82 countries and is thought to be transmitted between 35 and 45 percent more easily than other variants of coronavirus already found in the United States, the *Times* said.

Newer data

The British team first signaled more than a month ago that they thought there was a "realistic possibility" that B.1.1.7 might also be more lethal, based on a small amount of preliminary data. With more data now in hand, they say they have a 55 to 75 percent degree of confidence in the latest finding.

Exactly why the variant causes more death isn't clear. It could cause higher viral loads within the body, making treatment tougher. Muge Cevik, an infectious disease expert at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and a scientific adviser to the British government, told the *Times* the variant may also "transmit disproportionately in settings with frailer people," such as nursing homes, because it is more transmissible.

Vaccines already being distributed in the United States are believed to be effective against B.1.1.7, so Walensky said it's imperative that the massive rollout already underway continues. At the same time, and in the face of other new variants, other steps are underway, she told *CBS*.

Pharmaceutical companies are tweaking their research to fight the B.1.1.7 variant, she said, and the CDC is monitoring how people who've already gotten the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines are faring.

"But we're not waiting for that," she said. "We're doing the science to scale up different vaccines in case we either need bivalent vaccines, that is a vaccine that has two different strains, or booster vaccines. Both are happening."

In the meantime, she said, Americans need to continue with tried-and-true ways of curbing viral spread such as social distancing and mask-wearing.

"So what I would say is now is the time to not let up our guard. Now is the time to double down, still with 100,000 cases a day, still with over

two and a half times the cases we had over the summer," Walensky said.

Big boost in vaccine supply

The United States will have enough COVID-19 vaccines to inoculate 300 million Americans by summer, President Joe Biden announced Thursday.

During a tour of the National Institute of Health's Viral Pathogenesis Laboratory, where the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine was created, Biden said his administration had secured the delivery of 600 million doses of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines over the next five months, the *Associated Press* reported.

"We're now on track to have enough supply for 300 million Americans by the end of July," he announced.

The country is already on pace to exceed Biden's goal of administering 100 million vaccine doses in his first 100 days in office, with more than 26 million shots delivered during his first three weeks in office, the *AP* reported.

"That's just the floor," Biden said. "Our end goal is beating COVID-19."

If a third coronavirus vaccine, from drugmaker Johnson & Johnson, is approved for emergency use by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration at the end of February, the pace of vaccinations should accelerate even further.

Biden emphasized that his administration is doing everything possible to increase vaccine supply and the country's capacity to deliver injections into arms.

To date, the Biden administration has deployed active-duty troops to man mass vaccination sites in several states, as it looks to lay the groundwork for increasing the rate of vaccinations once more supply is available.

On the NIH tour, Biden was shown the lab bench where researchers sequenced the coronavirus and developed the precursor of the Moderna vaccine, the *AP* reported.

Just days after Chinese scientists shared the genetic blueprint of the new coronavirus in January of last year, the NIH had sent instructions to Moderna to brew up doses and scientists were already setting up the key lab and animal tests that would eventually prove they were on the right track, the *AP* reported.

All Americans could get vaccine by April: Fauci

Any American will be able to start getting vaccinated by April, the nation's leading infectious diseases expert predicted earlier this month.

During an interview on the "Today Show," Dr. Anthony Fauci said that month will be "open season" for vaccinations, as increased supplies of the vaccines will allow most people to get shots to protect against COVID-19.

Fauci, who serves as science adviser to President Joe Biden, added that the rate of vaccinations will greatly accelerate in the coming months. Why? He credited forthcoming deliveries of the two approved vaccines, the potential approval of a third vaccine and measures taken by the Biden administration to increase capacity to deliver doses.

"By the time we get to April," it will be "open season, namely virtually everybody and anybody in any category could start to get vaccinated,"

Fauci noted.

Despite that good news, he cautioned it will take "several more months" to actually deliver shots to Americans, but herd immunity could be achieved by late summer. As of Monday, more than 70 million doses have been distributed, while nearly 53 million Americans have been vaccinated. More than 14 million people have gotten their second shot.

Meanwhile, fully vaccinated Americans can now skip quarantines if they are exposed to someone infected with COVID-19, new federal guidelines say.

"Fully vaccinated persons who meet criteria will no longer be required to quarantine following an exposure to someone with COVID-19," the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in updated guidance posted Wednesday on its website.

There was one caveat: At least two weeks must have passed since the second shot, because it takes that long to build full immunity. But the CDC says it's not known how long protection lasts, so people who had their last shot three months ago or more should still quarantine if they are exposed or show symptoms, the agency added.

"This recommendation to waive quarantine for people with [vaccine](#)-derived immunity aligns with quarantine recommendations for those with natural immunity," the CDC said. People who have been vaccinated should still watch for symptoms for 14 days after they have been exposed to someone who is infected, the agency added.

That doesn't mean vaccinated people should stop practicing social distancing, the CDC noted.

"At this time, vaccinated persons should continue to follow current

guidance to protect themselves and others, including wearing a mask, staying at least 6 feet away from others, avoiding crowds, avoiding poorly ventilated spaces, covering coughs and sneezes, washing hands often, following CDC travel guidance, and following any applicable workplace or school guidance, including guidance related to personal protective equipment use or SARS-CoV-2 testing," the agency said.

A global scourge

By Monday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 27.6 million while the death toll passed 485,000, according to a *Times* tally. On Monday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with nearly 3.5 million cases; Texas with more than 2.5 million cases; Florida with over 1.8 million cases; New York with more than 1.5 million cases; and Illinois with over 1.1 million cases.

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

In India, the [coronavirus](#) case count was nearly 10.9 million by Monday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had over 9.8 million cases and more than 239,000 deaths as of Monday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 108.9 million on Monday, with more than 2.4 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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