

America sees COVID-19 deaths top 400,000, while new variants worry scientists

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Reporters



(HealthDay)—The tragic milestone was reached before a COVID-19 memorial service began in the nation's capital Tuesday evening: More than 400,000 Americans have now died from the new coronavirus.

"To heal, we must remember," President-elect Joe Biden said during the lighted vigil for [coronavirus](#) victims at the Lincoln Memorial. "And it's hard sometimes to remember. But that's how we heal. It's important to do that as a nation. That's why we're here today."

His words came as a chaotic U.S. [vaccine](#) rollout seeks to gather steam amid the discovery of new COVID-19 variants that might eventually threaten the efficacy of those vaccines.

Most troubling is a variant that first surfaced in South Africa but hasn't yet been spotted in the United States. A new lab study suggests someone might be able to get infected with the South African variant even if they've had COVID-19 before or have been vaccinated.

"I think we should be alarmed," senior study author Penny Moore, an associate professor at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases in South Africa, told *CNN*. Her team's results were published on the preprint server BioRxiv, and have not been peer-reviewed yet.

"Based on Penny's data, it's likely that the vaccine is going to be somewhat less effective, but how much less effective we don't know," David Montefiori, a virologist at Duke University Medical Center, told *CNN*. "This is the first time I've been concerned about a variant partially evading the immune response and partially evading the vaccine."

Both experts stressed that people should still get the vaccine. It's extremely effective against other forms of the virus, and they think it likely will still give some level of protection against the new variant.

In the study, Moore and her colleagues took blood from 44 people who'd already had COVID-19. Nearly all of their cases were confirmed to have occurred prior to September, before the variant was spotted in South Africa.

The researchers then looked to see whether their antibodies would fight off the new variant.

For about half of the 44 people, their antibodies were powerless against the new variant.

"We saw a knockout," Moore said. "It was a scary result."

For the other half, the antibody response was weakened, but not totally knocked out.

The analysis showed that the strongest antibody response was from those who had suffered more severe cases of COVID-19. The culprits were mutations in two different parts of the spikes that sit atop the coronavirus. The vaccines work by targeting those spikes.

"It was a two-armed escape from the immune system," Moore told *CNN*.

Her team is now gathering blood from people who've been vaccinated to see if their antibodies can fight off the new variant.

"I think the data on people with prior infection raises all kinds of red flags for the vaccines," she said. "We have to test it to find out."

Still, it may not be time to panic: Montefiori thinks the vaccine will likely take a hit—but probably not a huge one.

"We have to remember, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are 95%

effective—that's an extraordinary level of efficacy," Montefiori said. "If it reduces to 90, 80, 70% effective, that is still very, very good and likely to have a major impact on the pandemic."

Biden details massive vaccination effort

President-elect Joe Biden has unveiled an ambitious national vaccination plan that will deliver coronavirus vaccines to far more people and invoke a wartime law to boost vaccine production.

He pledged to ramp up vaccination availability in pharmacies, build mobile clinics to get vaccines to underserved rural and urban communities and encourage states to expand vaccine eligibility to people 65 and older, *The New York Times* reported. Biden also vowed to make racial equity a priority in fighting a virus that has disproportionately infected and killed minorities.

"Our plan is as clear as it is bold: get more people vaccinated for free, create more places for them to get vaccinated, mobilize more medical teams to get the shots in people's arms, increase supply and get it out the door as soon as possible," he said. "You have my word... we will manage the hell out of this operation."

But Biden faces a stark reality: With only two federally authorized vaccines in circulation, supplies will likely be limited for the next several months.

Even if Biden invokes the Korean War-era Defense Production Act, it may take some time to ease vaccine shortages. The law has been invoked already, to important but limited effect, the *Times* reported. Biden has promised to build mass vaccination sites and develop new programs to serve high-risk people, including the developmentally disabled and those in jail. But those promises will only be achieved if there are vaccines

available.

"It won't mean that everyone in this group will get vaccinated immediately, as the supply is not where it needs to be," Biden conceded. But as new doses become available, he promised, "we'll reach more people who need them."

The vaccine distribution plan comes one day after Biden proposed a \$1.9 trillion pandemic "rescue" package that includes \$20 billion for the vaccine effort. Biden has said repeatedly that he intends to get "100 million COVID vaccine shots into the arms of the American people" by his 100th day in office.

As of Wednesday, nearly 15.7 million Americans had been vaccinated while over 31 million doses have been distributed, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Just over 2 million people have received their second shot.

A global scourge

By Wednesday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 24.3 million while the death toll passed 401,800, according to a *Times* tally. On Wednesday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with nearly 3.1 million cases; Texas with almost 2.2 million cases; Florida with nearly 1.6 million cases; New York with close to 1.3 million cases; and Illinois with almost 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 over 10.6 million by Wednesday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had nearly 8.6 million cases and over 211,400 deaths as of Wednesday, the Hopkins

tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 96.3 million on Wednesday, with over 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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