

Record number of COVID cases, deaths reported in U.S. again

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A record-shattering number of coronavirus infections and deaths were

reported Thursday in the United States, as health officials fretted about a new, more contagious variant that has now been detected in eight states.

The grim statistics? At least 280,000 new cases and more than 4,000 deaths on Thursday, according to *The New York Times*.

There was a glimmer of good news, however: Pfizer Inc. announced Thursday that early testing shows its vaccine does still work against the more infectious variants of SARS-CoV-2 first found in Britain and South Africa, *Reuters* reported. Meanwhile, Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel said Thursday that his company was about to confirm that its vaccine would also work against the new variants, *Reuters* said.

Pfizer and scientists from the University of Texas Medical Branch have just completed a study that is awaiting peer review that showed the vaccine neutralized the virus with the N501Y mutation of the coronavirus spike protein, the news service reported. The findings are limited, because they didn't look at the full set of mutations found in either of the new variants, the *Washington Post* reported.

With the U.S. vaccine rollout plagued by delays, Dr. Anthony Fauci urged Americans to be patient on Thursday. In an interview with *NPR*, he said that any program as ambitious as the vaccine rollout would likely falter at certain points and the holidays may have made matters worse, he said.

"I think it would be fair to just observe what happens in the next couple of weeks," Fauci said. "If we don't catch up on what the original goal was, then we really need to make some changes about what we're doing."

Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, also said it was not surprising that the vaccine drive had gotten off to a "rocky" start.

"That's a lot of logistics," he told the *Post*. "So maybe we shouldn't be too shocked that it didn't go like clockwork."

Luckily, vaccinations are beginning to speed up, the *Times* reported.

In the third week of the drive, more people received their initial shots than in the first two weeks combined. The government count rose by 470,000 from Tuesday to Wednesday, and then by another 612,000 from Wednesday to Thursday, the *Times* reported.

More infectious COVID variant now seen in eight 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 said this week.

Texas, Pennsylvania and Connecticut joined California, Florida, New York, Georgia and Colorado on Thursday with reports of variant cases. There are now at least 56 confirmed cases in the country, with 26 reported in California and 22 reported in Florida, according to the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research & Policy.

"I would be surprised if that [number] doesn't grow pretty rapidly," Collins told the *Post* on Wednesday.

An official from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agreed.

"Here at the CDC, we're definitely taking this seriously, and we're assuming for now that this variant is more transmissible," said Greg

Armstrong, the leader of the CDC's strain surveillance program. The British variant "is probably not in every state at this point, but I think in a lot of states."

Armstrong told the *Post* that the CDC hopes to more than double the number of genomic sequences of the virus posted on public websites within the next two weeks.

"We're not sequencing enough yet, and we need to continue to build what we're doing," Armstrong said.

While the variant shows no signs of being more deadly than the original version of the virus, it 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.

Herd immunity will be reached when the virus encounters enough people with immunity that it dies out. Unfortunately, the percentage of people who need to be immune for a population to achieve herd immunity is higher for more infectious pathogens.

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

In addition to the [herd immunity](#) issue, any variants could limit the power of antibody treatments because those treatments are so narrowly focused.

The need to vaccinate as many people as possible as quickly as possible has become more urgent, and some scientists have argued that cutting

doses in half or delaying the second dose might be necessary to reach that goal. But the U.S. Food and Drug Administration last week said it would stick with the two-shot dose backed by randomized clinical trials.

"The data are really concerning. All signs right now are pointing to the fact that this [the new variant] is something we should be worried about," Mary Kathryn Grabowski, an infectious disease epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, told the *Post*. Even a seemingly modest increase in transmissibility, she said, "can mean huge, huge numbers of cases."

A global scourge

By Friday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 21.6 million while the death toll passed 365,400, according to a *Times* tally. On Friday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with nearly 2.6 million cases; Texas with over 1.9 million cases; Florida with over 1.4 million cases; New York with over 1 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 more than 10.4 million on Friday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had over 7.9 million cases and over 200,000 deaths as of Friday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 88.1 million on Friday, with over 1.9 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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