

# Battered by winter storms, U.S. vaccine rollout to redouble efforts next week

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(HealthDay)—After a week of brutal winter storms that stalled the country's coronavirus vaccination rollout, U.S. health officials said Thursday that vaccination efforts will have to ramp up rapidly as soon as the bad weather ends.

"We're going to just have to make up for it: namely do double-time when this thing clears up," Dr. Anthony Fauci told *MSNBC* on Thursday. "Obviously it's an issue. It's been slowed down in some places, going to a grinding halt. We're just going to have to make up for it as soon as the weather lifts a bit, the ice melts and we can get the trucks out and the people out."

Plunging temperatures, snow and ice have delayed the delivery of hundreds of thousands of doses just as [vaccine distribution](#) was gaining ground in the United States. Two vaccine shipping hubs—a FedEx facility in Memphis and a UPS facility in Louisville, Ky.—that were shut down by the bad weather were a big reason why vaccine distribution faltered, the *Times* reported.

But shipment delays were also reported in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Utah and Washington, among other states, forcing vaccination sites to temporarily close and coveted appointments to be canceled or rescheduled.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency said that more than 2,000 vaccine sites were in areas with power outages, the *Times* reported.

In Texas, where millions of residents lost power during the first snowstorm, a delivery of more than 400,000 first doses and 330,000 second doses was delayed, the *Times* reported. Chris Van Deusen, a spokesman for the Texas Department of State Health Services, said Thursday that the state was "asking providers that aren't able to store vaccine due to power outages to transfer it elsewhere or administer it so

it doesn't spoil."

Meanwhile, the Houston Health Department said Thursday it would restart vaccinations for second doses this weekend and schedule additional first- and second-dose appointments next week.

In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio said at a news conference that "a vast majority of the resupply" the city was expecting for this week had not yet shipped. The city has had to hold off on scheduling upward of 35,000 appointments for first vaccine doses because of delays and shortages, the *Times* reported. In Los Angeles, the city said that appointments for about 12,500 would be delayed, the newspaper said.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said that while 136,000 Pfizer doses had arrived this week, the state had not received its weekly shipment of 200,000 Moderna doses. He said the shipment could be delayed until Monday.

"Because of the storms we are seeing in the rest of the country, it's basically sitting in the FedEx warehouse—and I don't think they can even get into it because of everything," DeSantis said at a Thursday news conference.

As of Friday, nearly 58 million people had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, including just over 16 million people who have received both doses, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

## **Pfizer, Moderna vaccines less effective against South African variant**

Two of the world's leading [coronavirus](#) vaccines don't work as well

against a more contagious South African variant, though both did manage to neutralize the virus, two new studies show.

But experts pointed out that what level of neutralization is needed to actually protect against the variant is still unclear and these latest studies on the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were done in a lab setting, and not the real world, the *Washington Post* reported. Both reports were published Wednesday in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

"These are in vitro studies and we don't know if there is a threshold for neutralization that defines protection. In fact, we don't even know that there is a quantitative correlation between antibodies levels and protection," *NEJM* Editor-in-Chief Eric Rubin said in a podcast on the findings. "It is very concerning that we don't know the clinical significance of these findings."

The two studies used genetically engineered versions of the South African variant against blood samples from vaccinated volunteers, the *Post* reported. The strain has been identified in many countries, including the United States, along with a variant first identified in Britain that scientists say is also highly contagious.

Moderna's research letter in the *NEJM* on its COVID-19 vaccine showed a sixfold drop in antibody levels against the South Africa strain, the newspaper said. The shot's efficacy against the variant has not yet been determined.

Pfizer, in testing its vaccine against the variant in a lab, found the shot generated about a third of the antibodies that are normally mobilized with the original strain. The activity, however, appeared to be enough to neutralize the virus.

Still, Pfizer said in a statement that it was "taking the necessary steps...

to develop and seek authorization" for an updated vaccine or booster shot that could better combat the variant.

## **New evidence that British COVID variant could be more deadly**

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 CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky.

Speaking on CBS' "Face the Nation" earlier this week, 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."

As of Friday, there were 1,523 cases of the British variant found in 42 U.S. states, according to the CDC.

Walensky's 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.

"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*.

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."

## A global scourge

By Friday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 27.9 million while the death toll was nearly 493,000, according to a *Times* tally. On Friday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with over 3.5 million cases; Texas with nearly 2.6 million cases; Florida with over 1.8 million cases; New York with more than 1.5 million cases; and Illinois with nearly 1.2 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 10.9 million by Friday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had just over 10 million cases and more than 243,000 deaths as of Friday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections neared 110.4 million on Thursday, 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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