

States broaden COVID vaccine access to millions of Americans

March 17 2021, by Ernie Mundell and Robin Foster



States are rapidly expanding eligibility for coronavirus vaccines as they

race to meet President Joe Biden's deadline to have shots for all American adults by May 1.

At the beginning of the vaccine rollout, COVID-19 vaccines were available only to the most vulnerable Americans and some essential workers. Now, three states—Maine, Virginia and Wisconsin—along with Washington, D.C., have said they will open eligibility to their general population by May 1, *The New York Times* reported. At least six other states—including Colorado, Connecticut, Ohio, Michigan, Montana and Utah—hope to do so this month or next.

Meanwhile, anyone aged 16 or older can now get a vaccine In Mississippi and Alaska, while Arizona and Michigan have made the vaccines available to all adults in some counties, the *Times* reported.

With three [coronavirus](#) vaccines now in use, Biden has set a lofty goal that many states intend to reach.

Several have already been expanding eligibility for vaccinations. In Ohio, vaccines will open to anyone 40 and up as of Friday, and to more residents with certain medical conditions, the *Times* reported. Indiana extended access to people 45 and older, effective immediately.

Coloradans age 50 and up will be eligible for a shot on Friday, along with anyone 16 years and older with certain medical conditions, the *Times* reported. And Wisconsin said on Tuesday that residents aged 16 and up with certain medical conditions would be eligible a week earlier than initially planned. On Monday, Texans age 50 and older and Georgians over 55 became eligible for vaccines.

In New York, residents aged 60 and older are eligible to receive a vaccine, and more frontline workers will become eligible on Wednesday, including government employees, building services workers and

employees of nonprofit groups. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has yet to announce how or when the state will open eligibility to all adults.

Since vaccinations began in December, the federal government has delivered nearly 143 million vaccine doses to states and territories, and more than 77 percent have been administered, according to the latest figures from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The country is averaging about 2.4 million shots a day, compared with well under 1 million a day in January, the *Times* said.

As of Wednesday, 65 percent of the country's seniors had received at least one vaccine dose, with 37 percent fully vaccinated.

At the same time, coronavirus cases, deaths and hospitalizations are significantly down from the peak levels reported in January, the *Times* reported. But progress has slowed noticeably since the beginning of March, with continued drops in some states offset by persistent outbreaks in other parts of the country, especially the Northeast.

Biden weighs national face mask standard for workplaces

The Biden Administration is deliberating on a nationwide face mask standard for workplaces, although it has already missed its own deadline for a decision.

On Jan. 21, Biden told the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to determine by March 15, if such a standard is needed, *CBS News* reported.

An emergency temporary standard on face masks in the workplace is expected to be issued soon, but the analysis has not yet been completed,

three people familiar with the process told *CBS News*. The nationwide temporary standard for face masks in the workplace would impact millions of workers and would likely last six months.

Public health and workplace safety experts told *CBS News* the emergency temporary standard could provide valuable social distancing advice for workers and safety guidance for face masks, since they vary in their protective abilities.

OSHA workplace standards typically take years to implement, so an emergency temporary standard has sometimes been used to counter "grave dangers" facing workers, *CBS News* reported.

The last time an emergency standard was used was in 1983 to limit asbestos exposure in the workplace, according to the Congressional Research Service. The rule was eventually struck down in court.

Without a nationwide standard so far during the pandemic, several states have enacted their own standards, *CBS News* reported.

Dr. David Michaels, a former assistant secretary of labor for OSHA who served on Biden's presidential transition team, explained to *CBS News* the technical aspects of any emergency temporary standard must be balanced with the urgent need to protect workers from the spread of COVID-19.

"The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has been working diligently, as appropriate, to consider what standards may be necessary, and is taking the time to get this right," a Labor Department spokesperson told *CBS News* on Monday. This official did not offer any timeline for their decision.

"[The president's] objective is actually to protect workers and members

of the workforce," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Monday when asked about the OSHA deliberations, "We are waiting for them to make a conclusion."

New guidance gives vaccinated Americans more freedom

New social distancing guidance released by the federal government last week gives fully vaccinated Americans more freedom to socialize and move through their communities.

The CDC said people who are two weeks past their final shot can safely visit indoors with unvaccinated members of a single household at low risk of severe disease without wearing masks or social distancing. That recommendation would free many vaccinated grandparents who live near their unvaccinated children and grandchildren to gather for the first time since the pandemic began a year ago.

The CDC also said fully vaccinated people can gather indoors with those who are also fully vaccinated, and they do not need to be quarantined or tested after exposure to COVID-19.

"We know that people want to get vaccinated so they can get back to doing the things they enjoy with the people they love," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said in an agency news release. "There are some activities that fully vaccinated people can begin to resume now in their own homes. Everyone—even those who are vaccinated—should continue with all mitigation strategies when in public settings."

Some restrictions were still advised, even for the vaccinated. For example, if a vaccinated person lives in a group setting and is around someone with COVID-19, he or she should still stay away from others

for 14 days and get tested, even without symptoms.

Peter Hotez, co-director of the Texas Children's Center for Vaccine Development, welcomed the new guidelines, but added they have been too long in coming.

"The sooner we move to telling people if you're fully vaccinated, you don't have to wear masks—that will be an incentive for people to get vaccinated," Hotez told the *Washington Post*.

The level of caution people need to exercise should be determined by the characteristics of those who are unvaccinated in a social setting, the CDC said.

For instance, if a fully vaccinated person visits an unvaccinated friend who is 70, and therefore at risk of severe disease, the visit should take place outdoors, with masks and physical distancing, the guidance says.

A global scourge

By Wednesday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 29.5 million while the death toll passed 536,000, according to a *Times* tally. On Wednesday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with over 3.6 million cases; Texas with more than 2.7 million cases; Florida with nearly 2 million cases; New York with more than 1.7 million cases; and Illinois with over 1.2 million cases.

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

In Brazil, the coronavirus case count was over 11.6 million by Wednesday, with over 282,000 deaths, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. India had over 11.4 million cases and nearly 159,000 deaths as

of Wednesday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections neared 120.8 million on Wednesday, with more than 2.6 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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