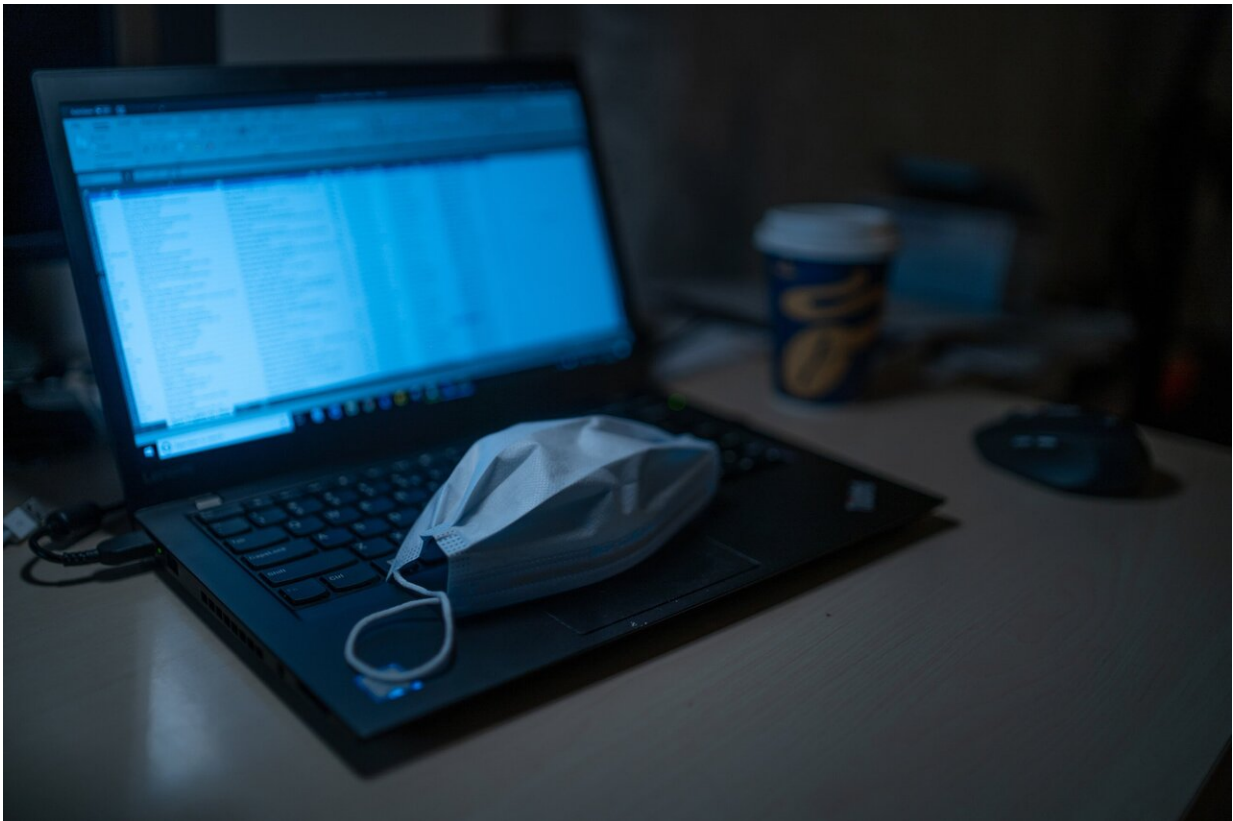


US hits vaccine milestone as NZealand, Australia open travel bubble

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The hard-hit United States has passed a hopeful milestone as half its adults have had at least one COVID vaccine dose and from Monday all its over 18s will be eligible to get their shot.

The positive news from America—the world's hardest-hit country—comes amid easing restrictions for several European nations and the launch of a quarantine-free travel bubble between Australia and New Zealand.

But in India authorities were scrambling to free up hospital beds and secure additional supplies of oxygen and treatment drugs as the vast nation reported a record daily caseload.

More than a quarter of a million new infections were tallied Sunday, with [health workers](#) bracing for further surges as millions of pilgrims attend a religious festival and ongoing state elections draw huge rallies.

The coronavirus has killed more than 3 million people and infected at least 140 million, devastating the [world economy](#) and upending [daily life](#) since emerging in China in December 2019.

Roughly 130 million Americans aged 18 and over have now received a shot, representing 50.4 percent of the adult population, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Sunday.

The US is a world leader in vaccinations, but a recent surge in new daily infections prompted top pandemic advisor Anthony Fauci to warn Sunday that the country remains in a "precarious position."

White House efforts to speed up vaccinations hit a snag when health authorities reported six cases of young women developing a clotting disorder after taking the Johnson & Johnson shot.

But Fauci predicted the J&J jab would soon return to circulation, albeit possibly with some restrictions or warnings on its use.

' Cry, hug, kiss'

Australia and New Zealand got a glimpse of normal life Monday, as a long-awaited quarantine-free travel bubble opened across the Tasman Sea.

Family members tearfully reunited at Sydney's airport, while others readied for their first outbound flights in more than a year after New Zealand closed its doors in response to the pandemic.

"(I'll) yell, scream cry, hug, kiss, (feel) happy—all of these emotions at once," Denise O'Donoghue, 63, told AFP as she prepared to board her plane.

The opening received saturation coverage from media in both countries, with live television reporting from airports providing regular updates on the progress of flights.

On a grass embankment at the foot of Wellington Airport's runway, the words 'WELCOME WHANAU' (family) were spelled out in giant letters.

In Germany the mood was sombre as it held a national memorial service Sunday for its 80,000 COVID-19 victims as debate rages over measures put in place by Angela Merkel's government to halt contagion.

Anita Schedel, the widow of a 59-year-old doctor who died from the virus, spoke of the ordeal of watching her husband first be hospitalised and then succumb to the disease.

"After he arrived in hospital, my husband phoned me to say 'Don't worry, I'm in good hands. We'll see each other again'. Those were his last words," she said at the ceremony.

Portugal lifted its suspension on flights to and from Britain and Brazil

for "essential trips," and was set to allow restaurants, shopping centers, high schools and universities to reopen from Monday.

Switzerland was also set to start the week with a step towards normality, with outdoor seating permitted at restaurants and bars and cinemas, sports facilities, and in-person classes at universities re-opening.

Israel mask-free again

In Fiji authorities ordered two cities into lockdown Monday after recording its first case of COVID-19 community transmission in 12 months.

The Pacific island nation has largely contained the virus through strict isolation measures and border controls, recording less than 100 cases and just two deaths in a population of 930,000.

Meanwhile Israelis stepped into the streets without masks on Sunday for the first time in a year, as the country vaccinates its way out of a coronavirus nightmare.

Just months ago Israel had the world's highest infection rate, but sent its [coronavirus](#) caseload tumbling after striking a deal for a vast stock of Pfizer/BioNTech jabs.

"It's very strange but it's very nice," said Eliana Gamulka, 26, after getting off a bus near the busy Jerusalem shopping boulevard of Jaffa Street and removing her face covering.

"You can't pretend that you don't know anyone any more," she smiled.

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