

Vaccinations more urgent as variant that crippled india shows up in the U.S.

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The highly contagious coronavirus variant that brought India to its knees

this spring now accounts for 6 percent of new cases in the United States, the Biden administration said Tuesday.

Luckily, vaccines appear to work well against this version of the virus, which has spread like wildfire in Great Britain and threatens a full reopening of that country.

"It's essentially taking over" in the United Kingdom, Dr. Anthony Fauci said during a media briefing Tuesday. "We cannot let that happen in the United States, which is such a powerful argument" for vaccination, he stressed.

To demonstrate the efficacy of vaccines, Fauci referred to data from Britain's public health agency that shows two doses of the vaccines made by Pfizer and AstraZeneca are 88 percent effective in preventing symptomatic disease caused by the new variant, also known as Delta. He added that the Pfizer data would be similar for Moderna's product, which also is an mRNA [vaccine](#), the *Washington Post* reported.

But just one shot only offers just 33 percent protection, the data shows, a reminder of how strongly the second shot boosts immunity to the virus, Fauci said. With the United States in the midst of providing vaccines to adolescents and other people who have waited to get them, second doses are critical, he added.

Fauci noted infection rates in Britain are "peaking" among 12- to 20-year-olds, one of the groups that the United States is rushing to vaccinate. In Britain, the Delta variant now accounts for more than 60 percent of new infections, he said, and some British scientists are warning that the country now faces the possibility of a third surge, the *Post* reported.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 infections are at new lows in the United States,

but the virus continues to spread in communities with low vaccination rates, where highly contagious virus variants like Delta threaten those who have not had shots.

In Smith County, Tenn., where only 20 percent of people are fully vaccinated, there has been an almost 700 percent increase in hospitalizations for COVID-19 over the past two weeks, *The New York Times* reported. In Trousdale, Tenn., where only 23 percent of people have had two vaccine doses, hospitalizations have also surged by 700 percent in the same period.

People who become ill with COVID-19 now are, "in most age groups, twice as likely to end up hospitalized as people who got the virus earlier in the course of the pandemic," Dr. Ted Delbridge, executive director of the Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems, told the *Times*.

In Maryland, of those between the ages of 50 and 59 who contracted COVID-19 over the winter, about 8 percent were hospitalized, he said. From the end of April through the beginning of June, the hospitalization rate in that group was 19 percent, he told the *Times*.

Dangerous variants are likely to blame, Delbridge said. The variant first found in Britain, now known as Alpha, is deadlier and more contagious than most others and is now dominant in the United States. Last month, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said the variant made up 72 percent of U.S. cases at the time, the *Times* said.

But vaccines appear to have worked against the Alpha variant in this country.

"I think we got lucky, to be honest," Nathan Grubaugh, an

epidemiologist at Yale University, told the *Times*. "We're being rescued by the vaccine."

Plunging vaccination rates threaten Biden's July 4 goal

Plunging vaccination rates are imperiling President Joe Biden's goal of getting COVID shots into the arms of at least 70% of American adults by July 4, while public health experts worry that Southern states, where immunization numbers are the lowest, could see a spike in cases over the summer.

The United States is averaging fewer than 1 million shots per day, a decline of more than two-thirds from a peak of 3.4 million in April, the *Washington Post* reported, despite the fact that anyone age 12 and older can now get one of the three approved vaccines in the United States.

The steep decline began in mid-April, coinciding with the temporary suspension of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine while health officials investigated rare blood-clotting reactions. That drop has continued, with only 2.4 million adults getting their first shot last week. Officials must get a first dose to 4.2 million adults per week to meet Biden's July 4 goal, the *Post* reported.

The slowdown is national—with every state down at least two-thirds from its peak—and most keenly felt across the South and Midwest. Twelve states, including Utah, Oklahoma, Montana, the Dakotas and West Virginia, have seen vaccinations fall below 15 daily shots per 10,000 residents; Alabama had just four people per 10,000 residents get vaccinated last week, the *Post* reported.

There is some good news: A dozen states—many of them in the

Northeast, including Maine, Massachusetts and Connecticut—have already delivered one dose of vaccine into 70 percent of their adults, the *Times* reported.

But in much of the South, that benchmark is nowhere in sight.

In 15 states—including Arkansas, the Carolinas, Georgia and Louisiana—about half of adults or fewer have received a dose, the *Times* reported. In two states, Alabama and Mississippi, it would take about a year to get one dose to 70 percent of the population at the current pace of vaccination.

State [health officials](#) remain concerned that their residents are more susceptible to infection as restrictions ease across the country, the sense of urgency to get vaccinated drops and many Americans in warmer climates head indoors, where the virus spreads more efficiently, the *Times* said.

If there is a summer surge across the South, experts believe it won't be as grave as last summer's because at least some people are vaccinated and treatments have improved.

Younger people, who are less likely to be vaccinated, will be the most vulnerable during any surge this summer, Dr. Edward Trapido, an epidemiologist and associate dean for research at the Louisiana State University School of Public Health, told the *Times*. While death or severe illness is not as common for young people struck by COVID-19, it's still possible, he noted.

To avoid a summer surge, states across the South need to catch up to those in the Northeast, Dr. Peter Hotez, a vaccine expert at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, told the *Times*.

"We're just not even close to that in the Southern states," Hotez told the newspaper. He said he foresees a new wave in the South because "we're so underachieving in terms of vaccination."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the [new coronavirus](#).

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