

# Birx says U.S. COVID cases are skyrocketing as holidays approach

20 November 2020, by Ernie Mundell and Robin Foster Healthday Reporters



The new coronavirus is spreading across America with unprecedented speed, the White House Coronavirus Task Force said in its first briefing in four months on Thursday.

"This is more cases, more rapidly, than what we had seen before," Dr. Deborah Birx said during the briefing. "You can see the increase in [test](#) positivity to around 10%." That's the number of people tested who get a positive diagnosis.

Birx pointed to a map of the country that is covered in red, highlighting the number of daily hospitalizations, which now regularly tops 70,000, *CNN* reported. Birx said she has been crisscrossing the country as she tries to encourage state and local leaders to take measures to stop the spread of the virus.

Still, task force members spoke out against the idea of nationwide lockdowns or schools, even as New York City returned to remote learning this week, *CNN* reported.

"We do know what to do and we are asking every American to do those things today," Birx stressed. That starts with wearing masks, but also staying apart and limiting gatherings, she said.

The virus spreads even when people do not show symptoms, Birx noted. "It is because of this asymptomatic spread that we are asking people to wear a mask indoors," she said. "Decreasing those friend-and-family gatherings where people come together and unknowingly spread the virus," will also help slow the spread, she added.

Earlier Thursday, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asked Americans not to travel for Thanksgiving. More than 187,000 cases were announced nationwide on Thursday, another single-day record, and daily tallies have been rising in 47 states, according to *The New York Times*.

In California, officials reported more than 13,000 new cases, a single-day record, prompting the state to announce a 10 p.m. curfew for all but essential workers, the *Times* reported.

Even if the current seven-day national average of about 166,000 daily cases plateaued until the end of the year, nearly 7 million more people would still contract COVID-19, the *Times* said.

Though talk of two highly effective vaccines came this week, they will not be widely available until spring of 2021.

"We are in for a rough period through the end of February," Dr. Jessica Justman, a professor of epidemiology at Columbia University, told the *Times*. "It looks hard to find a way to break it."

## First rapid COVID test for home use gets emergency approval

The first [rapid coronavirus test](#) that can be taken at home with results delivered in 30 minutes was

cleared for emergency use by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration this week.

The simple nasal swab test, developed by Lucira Health, requires a prescription and people under the age of 14 can't perform the test on themselves, the FDA said in a statement.

The California company said that [clinical trials](#) showed 100% of patients were able to perform the Lucira test in about two minutes. That is significantly faster than labs, which currently take two to seven days to generate test results, the company noted in a statement. The test will cost about \$50.

While Lucira ramps up manufacturing of the test, it will only be available on a limited basis in point-of-care settings and healthcare networks that prescribe the test for patients to use at home, the company said. By the second quarter of 2021, the company plans to amend or file a new emergency use request so people who think they're infected with COVID-19 can communicate with a medical professional online through a dedicated website to arrange a prescription and overnight delivery of the test kit.

"Today's authorization for a complete at-home test is a significant step toward FDA's nationwide response to COVID-19," Jeff Shuren, director of FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health, said in a statement. "Now, more Americans who may have COVID-19 will be able to take immediate action, based on their results, to protect themselves and those around them."

A handful of other tests have been cleared by the FDA for at-home collection of samples, but all must then be shipped to a lab for processing, the *Times* reported.

Lab tests that look for the [coronavirus](#)'s genetic material using a technique called polymerase chain reaction (PCR) are still considered the gold standard for detecting the virus. But the new at-home test relies on similar principles. Like PCR, the new test repeatedly copies genetic material until it reaches detectable levels. While faster and easier to use than PCR tests, the new method is generally

thought to be less accurate, the *Times* reported.

People taking the battery-powered test swirl a nasal swab in both of their nostrils, then dip and stir the swab into a vial of chemicals. That vial is then plugged into a test cartridge that processes the sample. Within half an hour, the test cartridge will light up as "positive" or "negative." Federal guidelines note that people taking the test should report the results to their health care providers, who must then inform public health authorities to help track the virus's spread.

An at-home test for the virus "was going to happen," Omai Garner, a clinical microbiologist and diagnostics expert at the University of California, Los Angeles Health System, told the *Times*. "I am hopeful that it works well."

According to Lucira, the test accurately detected 94 percent of the infections found by a well-established PCR test. It also correctly identified 98 percent of the healthy, uninfected people.

### **COVID Vaccines Move Closer to Emergency Use Approval**

Pfizer and the German firm BioNTech announced Thursday that their vaccine is 95 percent effective and they will apply for emergency use approval Friday.

The experimental vaccine had already shown promise in an early analysis announced last week, but the trial sped to completion faster than anticipated because of the spike in coronavirus cases in the United States.

The trial results—delivered less than a year after researchers began working on the vaccine—shattered all speed records for vaccine development, the *Times* reported.

The vaccine's efficacy was consistent across age, race and ethnicity, the companies said. The most common serious adverse event was fatigue, with 3.7 percent of volunteers reporting tiredness after they took the second dose. Two percent of volunteers reported a headache after the second dose. Older adults reported fewer and milder side

effects, the companies noted.

"It's pretty amazing," said Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist at Yale University, told the *Times*. She said the results in people over 65 were the most promising. "We know from the influenza vaccine that it's very difficult to achieve protection in this age group with vaccines," she said, so 94 percent efficacy in that group "is really remarkable."

Federal health officials have said the first doses of the vaccines will most likely go to health care workers who are at high risk for exposure, as well as to people who are most vulnerable to the disease, such as older people.

Meanwhile, Moderna Inc. announced earlier this week that preliminary results show its coronavirus vaccine is 94.5 percent effective. The researchers behind the Moderna vaccine said the results were better than they had dared to imagine, though it will probably not be available until spring, the *Times* reported. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has said that coronavirus vaccines should be at least 50 percent effective to be approved.

### **COVID-19 continues to spread around the globe**

By Friday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 11.8 million while the death toll passed 252,000, according to a *Times* tally. According to the same tally, the top five states in coronavirus cases as of Friday were: Texas with over 1.1 million; California with just over 1 million; Florida with over 914,000; Illinois with nearly 623,000; and New York with over 584,000.

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

Many European countries are tightening restrictions, the *Associated Press* reported. France began a nationwide lockdown last week, and Germany and Austria have started partial lockdowns as government officials across the continent scramble to slow a sharp rise in infections that threatens to overwhelm their health care systems.

England has followed suit, while Italy, Greece and

Kosovo also announced new measures, the *AP* reported.

Things are no better in India, where the coronavirus case count has passed 9 million, a Johns Hopkins tally showed. More than 132,000 coronavirus patients have died in India, according to the Hopkins tally, but when measured as a proportion of the population, the country has had far fewer deaths than many others. Doctors say this reflects India's younger and leaner population. Still, the country's public health system is severely strained, and some sick patients cannot find hospital beds, the *Times* said. Only the United States has more coronavirus cases.

Meanwhile, Brazil passed 5.9 million cases and had over 168,000 deaths as of Friday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections neared 57 million on Friday, with over 1.3 million deaths, 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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APA citation: Birx says U.S. COVID cases are skyrocketing as holidays approach (2020, November 20) retrieved 25 January 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-birx-covid-cases-skyrocketing-holidays.html>

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