U.S. sees continued drop in new COVID cases

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New coronavirus case counts are now steadily dropping across the United States, as the worst of the latest surge in the pandemic seems to be subsiding.

Nationally, that daily average peaked on Jan. 8, with nearly 260,000 new cases, *The New York Times* reported. But by Feb. 3, that figure was 136,442, a 47 percent drop from that peak.

Some parts of the country, including the Upper Midwest, are experiencing bigger decreases in new cases than others. Four states in the region—Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and Iowa—have seen average daily cases fall by 80 percent or more, the *Times* reported.

There was yet another glimmer of hope on Thursday, after Johnson & Johnson announced it had asked the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for emergency approval of what would be the first single-dose vaccine in the country. If approved, this latest vaccine would join the two-dose vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna that are already being administered to Americans.

As for coronavirus cases, the places with the steepest decreases tended to be small counties where the overall case count is relatively small, leading to wild swings in the data, the *Times* said. Using data on roughly 600 counties that had at least 100 daily cases at their recent peak shows that cases have fallen 60 percent, on average.

The current decline in infections remains most pronounced in the Midwest. In Hennepin County, home to Minneapolis, daily cases have fallen to roughly 200 from 1,200, the *Times* reported. Wayne County, home to Detroit, saw a similar drop, to 220 from 1,200. While trending downward now, the current number of new cases is still higher than anything many of these areas experienced during the first six months of the coronavirus crisis, the newspaper said.

For instance, Maine saw relatively low case counts until November, when cases began to rise before peaking in late January at nearly 12 times the level of the state's peak last year, the *Times* reported. Despite

that, the current daily case count in Maine pales in comparison to states like Texas, whose rate is triple that of Maine when adjusted for population.

Hawaii is the only state in the country where the first wave was more severe than the second wave in terms of reported cases, the *Times* reported.

Whether the new coronavirus variants circulating in different parts of the country will trigger another surge in cases remains to be seen. The more contagious variant first spotted in Britain has now been detected in 33 states, for a total of 611 cases. But as more people are vaccinated, transmission rates could fall, experts believe.

Federal vaccination sites to open in California

The first COVID-19 vaccination sites run by the federal government will be opened in California as the Biden administration employs yet another tool to try to tame the coronavirus pandemic.

One center will be housed in the Oakland Coliseum where the Oakland Athletics baseball team plays and the other will be on the campus of California State University, Los Angeles, *NBC News* reported. Both will be near communities hit hardest by the pandemic, according to Jeffrey Zients, the White House COVID-19 response coordinator. The facilities will be staffed mostly with federal employees.

"These sites in California are just the beginning," Zients said during a media briefing this week. "We are working with, in partnership, in states across the country to stand up new sites and will have more to say on that in the coming weeks."

The initiative is a significant policy departure from the Trump

administration, which left actual vaccinations largely to the states and focused instead on the logistics of shipping vaccine doses across the country. But after states became overwhelmed trying to meet the demand from people seeking the vaccine, Biden's advisers urged him to take a more hands-on approach, *NBC News* reported.

The federal vaccination centers—which will be housed in stadiums, school gyms and parking lots—will be staffed by workers from FEMA, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Biden administration has been increasing the number of federal employees working on the effort and has directed 600 FEMA employees to work on the vaccination program, including 350 at vaccination sites, in addition to thousands of National Guard members in 39 states, *NBC News* reported.

Zients said that FEMA has provided $1.7 billion to 27 states to help pay for transportation, storage, and supplies for their vaccination programs.

U.S. health officials say they are in a race against time to increase the number of Americans vaccinated as more contagious variants of the virus spread across America. In the meantime, they urged the public to double down on mask-wearing and avoid large gatherings, like Super Bowl parties.

During television interviews on Wednesday, Dr. Anthony Fauci said that now isn't the time to invite people over for watch parties. Big events like Sunday's game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers are always a cause for concern over the potential for virus spread, Fauci said.

"You don't want parties with people that you haven't had much contact with," he told the *Today* show. "You just don't know if they're infected, so, as difficult as that is, at least this time around, just lay low and cool

it."

COVID vaccines to be shipped directly to U.S. pharmacies

The Biden administration said Tuesday that it will begin to deliver much needed coronavirus vaccines directly to retail pharmacies across the country.

The partnership includes 21 national pharmacies and will eventually include 40,000 locations across the country. The first shipment of 1 million vaccine doses will go out Feb. 11, the *Washington Post* reported.

"This will provide more sites for people to get vaccinated in their communities, and it's an important component to delivering vaccines equitably," Zients said during a media briefing this week. "This pharmacy program will expand access in neighborhoods across the country so you can make an appointment and get your shot conveniently and quickly."

As of Friday, more than 57.5 million vaccine doses had been distributed, with more than 35.2 million Americans vaccinated, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nearly 7 million Americans have received their second shot.

The direct shipment of vaccines to pharmacies will begin with a group of 6,500 stores. The initial locations will be in communities whose residents have disproportionately borne the burden of severe COVID-19, the *Post* reported.

The decision to send vaccine doses straight to pharmacies is based on the premise that they may be more familiar and easier to navigate than

websites run by public health departments, the newspaper said.

Zients tried to temper expectations for how much this first effort would help Americans frustrated by the difficulty of getting vaccine appointments.

"Many pharmacies across the country will not have vaccines or will have very limited supply," he said, without predicting a time frame for widening the use of retail locations.

He also announced that, starting this week, states are receiving 5 percent more vaccine doses, in addition to an already-announced increase of 16 percent, bringing the total to 10.5 million doses a week, the *Post* reported.

A global scourge

By Friday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 26.7 million while the death toll neared 456,000, according to a *Times* tally. On Friday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with nearly 3.4 million cases; Texas with more than 2.4 million cases; Florida with over 1.7 million cases; New York with more than 1.4 million cases; and Illinois with over 1.1 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 10.8 million by Friday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had nearly 9.4 million cases and more than 228,700 deaths as of Friday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 104.9 million on

Thursday, with nearly 2.3 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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