

## COVID Update January 22, 2021

West Virginia was reported on Monday to be leading the country in vaccine administration, using 'mom and pop' pharmacies instead of big chains, which seems to have increased acceptance of the vaccine due to the trust that residents have in them. Some states are running out of vaccine and having to cancel or reschedule appointments. In SC, a little over a third of the vaccines received have been administered but certain sites across the state are running short, and some counties are 'pharmacy deserts' where there is no facility that administers them, so logistical problems are significant.

Data from other countries with more transparent COVID case reporting from airlines indicates that air travel is extremely hazardous due to the impossibility of keeping travelers truly distanced throughout the process of arrival, check in, baggage handling, etc.

Gov. McMaster on Monday asked hospitals to cut down or discontinue elective procedures due to the shortage of staff due to COVID cases.

On Tuesday, Suffolk University reported a marked increase in vaccine acceptance in a poll of 1000 registered voters in the U.S. Now 56% of those surveyed say they will get the vaccine as soon it is available to them, a jump of 10 percentage points since the USA TODAY poll in December and up 30 points since October. However, expectation that things will get back to normal by the end of the year has waned from 51% in December to 44% now.

Daily case rates remain high in the upstate, but may be trending down slightly, with 3,567 new cases reported on Wednesday for Monday statewide, and a 24.9% positive test rate, down from over 30%

In the upstate, the only facilities administering vaccine to the public are Prisma and Bon Secours; and Ingles, Publix and Harris Teeter pharmacies. However, Prisma is giving vaccines to walk ins at the Kmart Plaza site, from 7 AM to 5 PM daily, with most recently reported wait times from 30 minutes to an hour and a half.

The Johnson and Johnson vaccine is now in Phase 3 trials which should be completed in early March and, if favorable, result in available vaccine shortly thereafter. It is a different technology than the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, using an attenuated adenovirus (a cold virus, modified so it can't reproduce) to introduce the spike protein gene (but not the virus itself), which then elicits an immune response. The single dose produced neutralizing antibodies in 90% of recipients which were sustained for 71 days. A two-dose study is in progress as well, to see if sustained immunity is improved with the repeat dose. A single dose, that does not require extreme freezing, would be much easier to transport and administer.

On Friday it was announced that S.C. health officials have slightly expanded the pool of people eligible for a COVID-19 vaccination to cover parents caring for medically fragile or severely disabled children.

Concern is increasing that virus mutations may decrease efficacy of the current vaccines. Although studies have shown a slight decrease it is not yet enough to be significant. The more the virus spreads, the more the risk of mutations increases, so countries with extremely high numbers of cases, including the U.S., Brazil and South Africa, provide more chances for 'vaccine escape.' This underscores the need for disease control with masks, distancing, and hand hygiene.

In some good news, it appears the current coronavirus wave appears to have peaked. NPR reported (1/21, Stein), "The devastating fall and winter wave of coronavirus infections that is causing so much misery across the U.S. appears to have finally peaked, according to several researchers who are closely tracking the virus." The article adds, "While another surge remains possible, especially with new, more infectious variants on the horizon, the number of new daily infections in the current wave appears to have hit a high in the past week or two and has been steadily declining in most states since, the researchers say." Ali Mokdad of the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, also said, "Yes, we have peaked in terms of cases. We are coming down, slowly. This is very good news – very good news." Bloomberg also reported (1/21, Levin) coronavirus cases are decreasing "in 46 states, reducing pressure on hospitals that have been fighting the virus for almost a year." According to data from the Covid Tracking Project, the seven-day average in the US has decreased 20% from a week ago, and in 42 of the 46 states where coronavirus cases are decreasing, "the seven-day case average has fallen more than 10% from a week earlier." In addition, the number of people hospitalized with SARS-CoV-2 in the US has decreased "to 122,700, the lowest since Dec. 28."