

## COVID Update February 5, 2021

Weekly new infections continued to fall this past week. As of Wednesday, the national seven-day total dipped to 958,965. That's down 45% from the peak just a few weeks ago. But the U.S. reported 21,602 deaths in the week ending Wednesday, still averaging a human toll worse than that of 9/11 every day. The U.S. has recorded nearly 453,000 COVID-19 deaths, arriving at that figure less than two months after reaching 300,000 deaths in December. That's a 50% increase in that time. By comparison, the first 150,000 U.S. deaths took six months.

The U.S. now has 26.5 million confirmed cases, according to Johns Hopkins University data. More than 55.9 million vaccine doses have been distributed in the U.S. and about 33.9 million have been administered, according to the CDC.

Variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus continue to be a concern, because some are clearly more transmissible (UK variant, which is widespread in the US) and may infect people who recently had COVID (South African variant, which was reported in S.C. and Maryland as of Jan. 29). The US is sequencing less than 1% of specimens, compared with Great Britain where 10% of viruses are sequenced. So we really don't know, yet, what the variant incidence is.

A new study reported Friday out of the University of Aberdeen, Scotland correlated COVID deaths to international travel. Researchers found an increase of 3.4% in the mean daily increase in COVID-19 deaths during the first wave of the pandemic across the 37 worst hit countries, for every 1 million international arrivals. This suggests that robust restriction of international travel early in the pandemic, in western Europe and the U.K., would have significantly impacted spread of the disease.

Canada announced new regulations requiring all travelers to the country to quarantine at a hotel for 14 days after arrival, at their own expense, which is expected to even more severely curtail travel to the country.

Vaccine safety has been verified in early VAERS (Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System) data. Anaphylaxis occurred in 11 people per million treated (compared to 2,000 to 4,000 per million of people given penicillin.) The reaction occurred within 30 minutes in 86% of individuals with reactions, and 81% of those with reactions had previously reported anaphylaxis, so allergy history is important information to obtain prior to administration.

The Moderna (but not Pfizer) vaccine can rarely cause 'COVID arm', a red, itchy rash, on the arm that was injected. Exact incidence is not yet known. It occurs on average a week after vaccination, lasts anywhere from 1 to 7 days, and is not a reason to not receive the second dose.

Vaccine supply continues to lag behind demand. Yet the CDC reported on Monday that 16 states have administered less than half the doses they have been shipped, so distribution remains a serious issue. On Wednesday it was announced that 1 million additional vaccine doses would be shipped to 6500 pharmacies, and in addition the amount being shipped weekly would increase from 10 to 10.5 million.

On Tuesday, OSHA issued new guidelines for workplace prevention of COVID-19, recommending that they be implemented by every employer. They are not yet the law but OSHA has been instructed by Biden to consider whether it should issue nationwide emergency temporary standards, which would carry legal requirements for employers.

On Wednesday, Governor McMaster announced that the age eligibility in SC would be lowered to 65 as of Monday February 8. Lawmakers are reviewing the vaccine distribution plan in response to complaints that the DHEC allocation plan, which is in part population based, neglects the elderly and impoverished in rural and underserved locations.

Cases per day continue to decline in S.C., but the state continues to have a very high incidence. In fact, only Fairfield and McCormick counties are out of the DHEC defined 'red zone' that allows nursing homes to decreased COVID screening to once per week among residents. Nationally, only 38% of nursing home staff have accepted the vaccine, but 78% of residents have received at least the first shot.

Although no vaccine was tested in pregnant women, Dr. Fauci reported in an interview that there are no 'red flags' that would make it appear unsafe in pregnancy, and most pregnant obstetricians report receiving it.

On Friday, the first death in S.C. of a teenager or child due to COVID was reported.