

COVID Update January 29, 2021

Cases, while dropping, remain high with 25.5 million confirmed cases and 427,000 deaths in the U.S. It is predicted that over 500,000 people will have died by February 20 and it will be months before most Americans are vaccinated, so even with the recent drop in case numbers in the upstate, we need to remain extremely vigilant with all COVID precautions. The U.S. is recording just under 3,100 deaths a day on average, down from more than 3,350 less than two weeks ago. New cases are averaging about 170,000 a day after peaking at almost 250,000 on Jan. 11.

SC is one of 15 states in which January has already been the deadliest month on record as of Jan 26. The post-holiday surge in South Carolina, particularly the Upstate, brought record breaking case numbers and deaths since December. Almost half of South Carolina's total cases, and a third of total deaths were recorded in the two months following Thanksgiving, according to a Greenville News report. The week after Thanksgiving (ending Dec. 5), South Carolina broke its record of cases in one week with 17,708. The previous record was 13,514 in the week ending July 18. Cases rose every week afterwards and peaked at 35,876 in the week ending Jan. 9. Deaths followed a similar trajectory. Test positivity rate remains above 25%.

The "U.K. variant" or B.1.1.7 continues to spread in the U.S., and is about 50% more transmissible than the most common previous variant. It has now been reported by UK authorities that it may also cause up to 30% more mortality, but the numbers studied were small (384 total deaths in people with the variant.). Both currently available vaccines continue to be effective. Although decreased antibody responses have been noted to the "Brazil variant" after vaccine is given, the response is still very high and will prevent disease.

The new, more transmissible variants are also bringing into question the 'six foot distance' rule, which was an estimate in the first place. Even further distancing, when contact outside the family unit is completely unavoidable, is a good idea. Contact tracing of 20 NFL players found that 7 of them had not had 'close contact' as defined by more than 15 minutes within 6 feet of someone confirmed or suspected to have COVID, it was reported Monday in the CDC's MMWR.

The variants are occurring because new cases are spreading so rapidly that the virus is multiplying very fast, so there are more opportunities for mutation to occur. Stemming the pandemic, with masks and distancing, would stem the development of the variants, as well. It is possible that repeat COVID infection, with a different variant, can occur, which is of course quite worrisome. This has been documented to occur with the 'South African variant,' of which two cases have been found in S.C. in persons with no travel history.

Double mask wearing has been in the news again. Wearing a stocking or gaiter over a mask does improve its effectiveness, mainly by sealing the edges more closely to the face, and an additional mask layer might increase effectiveness if the masks are thin cloth. N95 masks should be reserved for health care workers and only work if they are so tightly fitted as to force breathing through the material, instead of loose around the edges (which is how most people wear them because the tight fit is uncomfortable.) The South Korean KF94 can be very effective and also needs to be worn tightly fitted, which is difficult because it has ear loops instead of around the head ties.

It was announced on the Wednesday that the US has contracted to purchase another 200 million doses of vaccine, enough to immunize most Americans by late summer or early fall.

Merck announced on Monday the discontinuation of their one-dose vaccine development due to poor efficacy in early trials.

In S.C., most long-term-care residents and staff who want them have received vaccines, so Walgreens and CVS pharmacies will soon begin providing vaccine to the general public. The number of sites administering vaccine in S.C. continues to expand. The main issue now is vaccine supply, which is lagging behind demand.