

COVID Update February 19, 2021

KEEP WEARING YOUR MASK! Even if you are vaccinated, and are protected from severe illness or death, you may still be able to contract a mild COVID case and shed virus, infecting others. We MUST keep up with masking, distancing, hand hygiene, and avoiding gatherings, for the time being, to prevent a resurgence of the virus.

On Friday Feb 12 it was announced by the CDC that the average daily new cases in the US had dropped below 100,000 for the first time since November 4, down from a high of 250,000 in January. As of Friday Feb 19, it is down to 73,431. In Greenville County, the two week cumulative of new cases is down to just over 554/100k people (a high level is considered to be greater than 200/100k population). The seven day moving average for the state is down to around 600 from a high of 2,000. So, definite improvement, but still high levels of new disease.

However, on Tuesday, Michael Osterholm, head of the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy and a Biden transition team advisor on COVID-19, expressed concern that the worst of the pandemic is coming in the next 14 weeks because of a surge in cases due to the new B.1.1.7 variant of the coronavirus taking hold in the U.S., a leading infectious diseases epidemiologist said Monday. The surge will make it challenging for schools to reopen despite new guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Questions have arisen about the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is being offered in many European countries but being declined by many in favor of the Pfizer or Moderna shots, because it shows less efficacy, and was not tested in many older individuals. The World Health Organization said the AstraZeneca vaccine is about 63% effective at preventing symptomatic COVID-19 after two doses. That's less than the 95% effectiveness reported by Pfizer and Moderna, but experts caution against such comparisons as the studies were done at different times and under different conditions. Furthermore, all have proved extremely effective at preventing serious illness and death.

Many states, including S.C., have issued exemptions allowing currently unlicensed personnel to administer vaccine. However, the bottleneck is currently not personnel, but vaccine supply. The federal government has promised to ship 400 million doses by the end of April, and 600 million by the end of July, which would theoretically be enough to vaccinate the entire country. Last week, 1.7 million vaccines were being administered daily. However, the nationwide winter storm is disrupting vaccine efforts in many parts of the country, unfortunately.

On Tuesday February 15, the state Senate unanimously voted to allow teachers, regardless of age, to begin scheduling vaccinations. The measure, introduced by Republican Senate Majority Leader Shane Massey, also requires districts to offer in-person classes five days a week after spring break — even if teachers aren't fully vaccinated. According to a recent survey, 57% of school district employees — or about 75,000 people — said they would get the COVID-19 vaccine if provided immediately. However, Gov. McMaster has expressed concern that moving teachers to higher priority would decrease availability of the vaccine to the elderly.

On Monday, Healthcare.gov reopened to allow new enrollments for Obamacare, and will take applications through May 15. Loss of insurance coverage in the previous shrinkage of Affordable Care Act enrollment has negatively impacted medical care access during the COVID pandemic.

Gov. McMaster and SC State Senate President Harvey Peeler have announced the intent to break up SC DHEC by bundling health care services with mental health, and assigning environmental permits to other agencies. DHEC has not had a director for the past 19 months but a new director, Edward Simmer, MD, has just been installed. He has asked for a year to improve performance of the agency before any restructuring is effected.

Coronavirus variants continue to spread in the U.S. The B.1.1.7 variant first seen in the United Kingdom has been spreading rapidly. It has been reported for the first time in Maine, New Hampshire and Washington, D.C., and in in seven other states. It has been reported to be 30-70% more contagious, and cause 30-70% more severe illness, but the currently used vaccines are effective against it. There are now 1,173 known cases of B.1.1.7, which the CDC had said could become the predominate strain in March. The B.1.351 variant first seen in South Africa has now been reported in Illinois, Texas and D.C. There are concerns regarding decreased efficacy of the vaccines to B.1.351 but the vaccines still prevent severe disease and death, and manufacturers are already working on new vaccine that is more effective against potential variants.

On Wednesday Feb. 17 it was announced that the City of Clemson extended its mask ordinances and other COVID-19 restrictions to at least March 15, defying the pleas of more than 3,000 people who signed a petition asking the city to relax rules to match statewide mandates.

On Thursday Feb. 18 it was announced that a \$208 million COVID package aimed at helping rural and underserved areas has been approved by the South Carolina House of Representatives and could become law if the governor signs the bill. It was approved by the Senate last week. A spokesman for Gov. Henry McMaster said the governor will sign the measure once it reaches his desk. The money would come from the state's reserve contingency fund.