

COVID Update March 12, 2021

On Monday it was reported that in the previous week in the U.S., cases fell overall by 13.8%, deaths fell by 15.8%, and hospitalizations fell 13.6%. Overall test positivity rate was 4.6% but testing fell 16.7%.

The U.S. has over 29 million confirmed coronavirus cases and more than 527,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University data. The global totals: More than 117.8 million cases and 2.6 million deaths. More than 127.8 million vaccine doses have been distributed in the U.S. and 95.7 million have been administered, according to the CDC. The daily vaccination rate is now 2.2 million per day.

For SC, new daily reported cases fell 28.7%, deaths fell 6.2%, hospitalizations fell 25.1%. The positivity rate was 5.8%, and the number of tests reported rose 38.8% from the previous week.

On Thursday, CMS (federal Medicare agency overseeing nursing homes) announced new reopening guidelines for long term care facilities, which can open to visitors and family members if the county percent positive rate is 10% or less; there have been no COVID cases among staff or residents for the previous 14 days; at least 70% of residents are fully vaccinated; and 'core principles' of COVID prevention are maintained, including masks and distancing. (Only 6 counties in SC are currently above 10% in percent positive rate: Allendale, Barnwell, Chesterfield, Lancaster, McCormick, and York.) This announcement was released to the press at 5 PM on Wednesday but facilities were not informed of the changes, which increase the case positivity rate allowed for reopening from 5% or less, to 10% or less, so facilities nationwide were caught by surprise and are scrambling to accommodate the new guidelines. (Greenville County's test positivity rate dropped from 11.1% in the two weeks CMS reporting period ending Feb 24, to 8.6% for the period ending March 3.)

Hopeful signs that the pandemic is waning include the decrease of positive cases, hospitalizations, deaths and case positivity rate in many states. Worldwide, improvement in those parameters in some hard-hit countries, that have NOT implemented widespread COVID vaccination programs, suggests some natural waning phenomenon may be involved.

Since Dec. 14, more than 1,347,000 doses of a covid-19 vaccine have been administered in South Carolina. More than 479,000 people have completed vaccination, or about 9.32%.

Vaccine hesitancy overall also is falling. In September, 49% of Americans told the Pew research group they probably or definitely wouldn't take the vaccine. By last month, that number had fallen to 30%.

Amid this hopeful news, CNN reported that the more transmissible U.K. or B.1.1.7 variant is now at 30% of US cases, and that if it spreads to 50% of cases, the risk of a new surge in cases will increase. Some experts predict we are in the 'eye of the hurricane' because case numbers have stopped dropping overall, but have plateaued at a very high rate of about 60,000 per day.

The CDC issued new guidelines for fully vaccinated individuals. These state that fully vaccinated people don't need to wear a mask or socially distance inside a home when visiting other vaccinated people or an unvaccinated person from one household who is at low risk for severe COVID-19 disease. However, a person who is fully vaccinated should still wear a mask and socially distance in a home with someone who is unvaccinated and over 65, or has an underlying medical condition that puts them at risk for getting severely ill with COVID-19.

If vaccinated people are gathering with unvaccinated people from multiple households at the same time, everyone should wear a mask and follow social distancing protocols. The CDC also recommends gathering outdoors or in a well-ventilated space, and continues to recommend against any medium to large gatherings.

Fully vaccinated individuals should continue to wear masks and socially distance in public settings.

On Thursday, it was announced that there will be enough vaccine for all Americans to receive it beginning May 1, and states were called upon to open up eligibility criteria to include all citizens above the age of 18 by that date.