

COVID Update December 1, 2021

Cases in the U.S. dropped significantly in the past week, by 17%, and deaths declined 24%. With the increase in the number of those eligible to receive vaccines, now that children are included, the overall percent fully vaccinated is 59.1%, with a half million doses of vaccine being administered weekly. However, the US is still averaging 70,094 new COVID cases and 730 deaths each day, according to Johns Hopkins University, and 75% of intensive care unit beds in the US are occupied, 15% of them by COVID patients.

In S.C, cases declined markedly, by 49%, deaths fell 36% and hospitalizations fell 11 %, and the seven day rolling average daily case number as reported by Johns Hopkins for the entire state is now 7.2/100k population, which is a 'low' category for the state overall. However, Greenville County remains in the 'high' category of new cases.

The bad news has been the new 'omicron' COVID variant, B.1.1.529 first detected in South Africa a few days ago and now reported in many parts of the world, including Canada, Britain, twelve European countries, Hong Kong and Australia. Many countries including the U.S. have moved quickly to close travel from African nations, stranding many holiday travelers. It is most likely already in the U.S., where detailed genetic sequencing is performed so infrequently and sporadically that we are not likely to detect such variants quickly. Anecdotal information from South Africa so far is that the omicron COVID illness has been seen mostly in younger unvaccinated adults who showed mild symptoms. It is not yet known how virulent (likely to cause severe disease) the strain is, or how effective current vaccines will be against it, but it appears to be highly contagious due to the speed with which it has spread among the unvaccinated. It is assumed that current vaccines will have at least some effectiveness and officials in the U.S. are encouraging more rapid vaccine and booster administration as protective measures. Meanwhile, vaccine manufacturers are gearing up to produce a vaccine more specific to the omicron strain, should it be needed.

Addendum December 2, 2021

Prisma in Columbia was only giving monoclonal antibody infusions to those at risk of severe COVID at a rate of one every other day, but had 26 infusions this past Sunday, so numbers are climbing rapidly again in the midlands.

The Omicron variant was reported in the U.S., in California, in a traveler returned from South Africa on Nov. 22 who became ill and tested positive on Nov. 29. He has mild illness and none of his close contacts have tested positive for COVID.

Germany announced a nationwide shutdown of all but essential businesses like pharmacies and supermarkets for one week, and is considering mandatory vaccination beginning in February.

Molnupiravir, Merck's recently approved anti-COVID pill, initially reported as preventing 50% of hospitalizations, has been shown in further studies to be only 30% effective at preventing severe illness and hospitalization.

Clemson University, which runs its own COVID testing program, announced that they will this week begin genetic sequencing of ALL positive specimens in an attempt to discover the prevalence of the Omicron variant.

Advisors to the CDC have stated that it will soon modify its travel guidance to require negative COVID testing within 24 hours before departure of ALL travelers by air to the U.S regardless of origin of travel, nationality, citizenship, or vaccination status.

South Carolina's seven day rolling daily case number per 100k population increased 6% in the past week, hospitalizations increased 8%, and deaths increased 23%.