

Coronavirus

Virus fatigue grows

Americans still wait for advice after jabs

NEW YORK, March 7, (AP) — More than 27 million Americans fully vaccinated against the coronavirus will have to keep waiting for guidance from federal health officials for what they should and shouldn't do.

The Biden administration said Friday it's focused on getting the guidance right and accommodating emerging science, but the delays add to the uncertainty around bringing about an end to the pandemic as the nation's virus fatigue grows.

"These are complex issues and the science is rapidly evolving," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Friday. "We are making sure and taking time to get this right and we will be releasing this guidance soon."

Such guidance would address a flood of questions coming in from people who have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19: Do I still have to wear a mask? Can I go to a bar now? Can I finally see my grandchildren?

The need has slowly grown since January, when the first Americans began to complete the two-dose series of COVID-19 vaccines then available.

In Washington state, Raul Espinoza Gomez has 22 grandchildren and great-grandchildren and an appointment Saturday for his second dose of coronavirus vaccine.

By Easter, the 77-year-old's immune system will be ready to protect him from the virus. But how the family celebrates will depend on government advice, said Melissa Espinoza, 47, of Carnation, Washington, who plans to drive Gomez, her father-in-law, to get his second shot.

"We didn't gather together as a big family at Christmas," she said. "We go by what the state and federal guidelines recommend. We've had family members adversely affected by COVID. We know the risks are severe."

Worried about persistently high case loads and deaths, the Biden administration has condemned efforts to relax states' virus restrictions and pleaded with the public for several months more patience.

The caution has drawn critics, who point to the administration's own warnings that "fatigue is winning" as evidence that they need to be more optimistic about the path ahead to secure the cooperation of those who are yet to be vaccinated.

Guidance

"I think it's going to be overly prescriptive and conservative and that's the wrong message," former FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb told CNBC Wednesday of the forthcoming CDC guidance. "If we continue to be very prescriptive and not give people a realistic vision for what a better future is going to look like, they're going to start to ignore the public health guidance."

Dr. Jeremy Faust, an emergency physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in the Division of Health Policy and Public Health, encouraged the CDC to be clearer about when and how it plans to produce guidelines for the vaccinated.

"Making the decision to go by the science is also making the decision that you're going to have to make a decision, which is really difficult when the science isn't settled," he told the AP. "They're drinking from a firehose of science, and sometimes, it gets messy."

More than 54 million Americans have received at least one dose of vaccine, and slightly more than half - nearly 28 million - have gotten the recommended two doses. The single-dose Johnson & Johnson shot soon will add a couple million more Americans with questions about what new freedoms they can safely enjoy.

"I do hope I get to see my great-grandchildren more," said Rolando Solar, 92, who received his second dose in Miami Wednesday. "But I know things will not go back to normal and, for an old man like me, this is as good as it will be."

Tami Katz-Freiman, 65, of Miami, got her second dose three weeks ago, and plans to watch the Miami Film Festival virtually Sunday at the home of unvaccinated friends. All will wear masks.

"We didn't have to discuss it with each other, because it's very clear to me that when there is a doubt and you don't have a CDC straightforward rule you better be on the safe side and take care for yourself," Katz-Freiman said.

Three weeks ago, the CDC announced that fully vaccinated people do not have to go into quarantine if they have contact with someone with a confirmed infection (for 90 days after the final shot). But the agency said nothing beyond that, noted Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician and public health professor at George Washington University.

"That (quarantine guidance) seems to imply to me that your chance of contracting COVID-19 and being a carrier to others is pretty low," said Wen, who previously ran Baltimore's health department.

"(But) we need to focus on what is most relevant to people's lives, and my patients are not coming in and asking me: 'If I'm vaccinated, do I still need to quarantine if I'm exposed?'" she continued.

Questions

Experts say it's understandable that the CDC has been cautious when many scientific questions remain, including how long vaccine-induced immunity lasts, and whether vaccinated people are still able to transmit the virus to others. The answers are important when advising someone what kind of risk they face in different settings, and how much of a risk they are to others.

"The vaccines at their best, in the clinical trials, were 95% effective, I didn't say 100%. And that's why we have to keep wearing masks most of the time," said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious-diseases expert at Vanderbilt University.

But CDC has needed to come out with something more for vaccinated people than sticking with the same old mask wearing, social distancing guidance, he added.

"People are so eager to do something and they want to see some tangible benefit from the vaccines. Americans are impatient. They want to get on with it," Schaffner said.

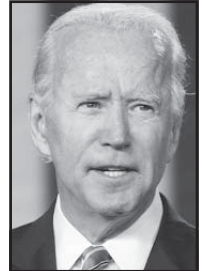
Indeed, "there is a real cost to putting off this guidance," as people turn to their own doctors for advice, or just make their own assumptions and decisions, Wen said.

Waiting too long can diminish the agency's relevance on this kind of matter, said Wen, who believes CDC should have had some kind of guidance in place for vaccinated people back in January.

Clearly, vaccinated people should have been encouraged to go get cancer screenings, dental care, or other needed medical appointments. CDC officials also could have said that it's OK for small groups of fully vaccinated people - maybe two or three couples, for example - to gather together for a dinner or other small gathering, she said.

Regarding small gatherings among people who have been fully vaccinated, "the relative risk is so low that you would not have to wear a mask, that you could have a good social gathering within the home," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's leading infectious diseases doctor, during a recent White House briefing.

Some experts discussed the possibility that movie theaters or cruise ships or certain other businesses might open up to vaccinated people, and ask for proof of vaccination status. Israel's government has begun issuing a "green pass" vaccination certificate to anyone who has received two doses of COVID vaccine through an accredited vaccination service.



Biden



In this Jan 13, 2021 file photo, microbiologist Marielle Bedotto-Buffet prepares samples at the University Hospital Institute for Infectious Diseases in Marseille, southern France, to study the highly contagious COVID-19 variant that has been discovered in the UK. Europe recorded 1 million new COVID-19 cases last week, an increase of 9% from the previous week and ending a six-week decline, WHO said March 4. The so-called UK variant is of greatest concern in the 53 countries monitored by WHO in Europe. (AP)

Coronavirus

Europe staggers as new cases multiply

Infectious variants power virus surge

MILAN, March 7, (AP) — The virus swept through a nursery school and an adjacent elementary school in the Milan suburb of Bollate with amazing speed. In a matter of just days, 45 children and 14 staff members had tested positive.

Genetic analysis confirmed what officials already suspected: The highly contagious coronavirus variant first identified in England was racing through the community, a densely packed city of nearly 40,000 with a chemical plant and a Pirelli bicycle tire factory a 15-minute drive from the heart of Milan.

"This demonstrates that the virus has a sort of intelligence ... We can put up all the barriers in the world and imagine that they work, but in the end, it adapts and penetrates them," lamented Bollate Mayor Francesco Vassallo.

Bollate was the first city in Lombardy, the northern region that has been the epicenter in each of Italy's three surges, to be sealed off from neighbors because of virus variants that the World Health Organization says are powering another uptick in infections across Europe. The variants also include versions first identified in South Africa and Brazil.

Infections

Europe recorded 1 million new COVID-19 cases last week, an increase of 9% from the previous week and a reversal that ended a six-week decline in new infections, WHO said Thursday.

"The spread of the variants is driving the increase, but not only," said Dr. Hans Kluge, WHO regional director for Europe, citing "also the opening of society, when it is not done in a safe and a controlled manner."

The variant first found in the UK is spreading significantly in 27 European countries monitored by WHO and is dominant in at least 10 countries: Britain, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Israel, Spain and Portugal.

It is up to 50% more transmissible than the virus that surged last spring and again in the fall, making it more adept at thwarting measures that were previously effective, WHO experts warned. Scientists have concluded that it is also more deadly.

"That is why health systems are struggling more now," Kluge said. "It really is at a tipping point. We have to hold the fort and be very vigilant."

In Lombardy, which bore the brunt of Italy's spring surge, intensive care wards are again filling up, with more than two-thirds of new positive tests being the UK variant, health officials said.

After putting two provinces and some 50 towns on a modified lockdown, Lombardy's regional governor announced tightened restrictions Friday and closed classrooms for all ages. Cases in Milan schools alone surged 33% in a week, the provincial health system's chief said.

The situation is dire in the Czech Republic, which this week registered a record-breaking total of nearly 8,500 patients hospitalized with COVID-19. Poland is opening temporary hospitals and imposing a partial lockdown as the U.K. variant has grown from 10% of all infections in February to 25% now.

Two patients from hard-hit Slovakia

Study finds mask mandates and dining out influence virus spread

NEW YORK, March 7, (AP) — A new national study adds strong evidence that mask mandates can slow the spread of the coronavirus, and that allowing dining at restaurants can increase cases and deaths.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released the study Friday.

"All of this is very consistent," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said during a White House briefing on Friday. "You have decreases in cases and deaths when you wear masks, and you have increases in cases and deaths when you have in-person restaurant dining."

The study was released just as some states are rescinding mask mandates and restaurant limits. Earlier this week, Texas became the biggest state to lift its mask rule, joining a movement by many governors to loosen COVID-19 restrictions despite pleas from health officials.

"It's a solid piece of work that makes the case quite strongly that in-person dining is one of the more important things that needs to be handled if you're going to control the pandemic," said William Hanage, a Harvard University expert on disease dynamics who was not involved in the study.

The new research builds on smaller CDC studies, including one that found that people in 10 states who became infected in July were more likely to have dined at a restaurant and another that found mask mandates in 10 states were associated with reductions in hospitalizations.

The CDC researchers looked at US counties placed under state-issued mask mandates and at counties that allowed restaurant

dining - both indoors and at tables outside. The study looked at data from March through December of last year.

The scientists found that mask mandates were associated with reduced coronavirus transmission, and that improvements in new cases and deaths increased as time went on.

The reductions in growth rates varied from half a percentage point to nearly 2 percentage points. That may sound small, but the large number of people involved means the impact grows with time, experts said.

"Each day that growth rate is going down, the cumulative effect - in terms of cases and deaths - adds up to be quite substantial," said Gery Guy Jr., a CDC scientist who was the study's lead author.

Reopening restaurant dining was not followed by a significant increase in cases and deaths in the first 40 days after restrictions were lifted. But after that, there were increases of about 1 percentage point in the growth rate of cases and - later - 2 to 3 percentage points in the growth rate of deaths.

The delay could be because restaurants didn't reopen immediately and because many customers may have been hesitant to dine in right after restrictions were lifted, Guy said.

Also, there's always a lag between when people are infected and when they become ill, and longer to when they end up in the hospital and die. In the case of dining out, a delay in deaths can also be caused by the fact that the diners themselves may not die, but they could get infected and then spread it to others who get sick and die, Hanage said.

While the UK variant is dominant in France, forcing lockdowns in the French Riviera city of Nice and the northern port of Dunkirk, the variant first detected in South Africa has emerged as the most prevalent in France's Moselle region, which borders Germany and Luxembourg. It represents 55% of the virus circulating there.

Austria's health minister said Saturday the UK variant is now dominant in his country. But the South Africa variant is also a concern in a district of Austria that extends from Italy to Germany, with Austrian officials announcing plans to vaccinate most of the 84,000 residents there to curb its spread. Austria is also requiring motorists along the Brenner highway, a major north-south route, to show negative test results.

The South Africa variant, now present in 26 European countries, is a source of particular concern because of doubts over whether the current vaccines are effective enough against it. The Brazilian variant, which appears capable of reinfecting people, has been detected in 15 European countries.



In this Aug 6, 2020 file photo, provided by Russian Direct Investment Fund, an employee works with a coronavirus vaccine at the Nikolai Gamaleya National Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology in Moscow, Russia. Russia's boast in August that it was the first country to authorize a coronavirus vaccine led to skepticism because of its insufficient testing on only a few dozen people. Now, with demand growing for the Sputnik V, experts are raising questions again, this time over whether Moscow can keep up with all the orders from countries that want it. (AP)

Discovery

China sets 'energy goals': China, the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, announced generally moderate new energy and climate targets on Friday that give little sign that it will step up its pace in combating climate change.

On a smoggy day in Beijing, Premier Li Keqiang said the country will reduce carbon emissions per unit of economic output by 18% over the next five years. He was speaking at the annual meeting of the National People's Congress, China's ceremonial legislature, that began Friday.

The meeting is China's highest-profile political event of the year, where the ruling Communist Party unveils new policies and legislation.

The 18% target is the same as in the previous five-year economic plan. The country uses carbon emissions per unit of economic output, or carbon intensity, instead of absolute emission reduction targets.

"We were very keen to see what the 14th five-year plan would say about how to actually get there, or maybe even more ambitious targets," said Dimitri de Boer, chief representative of ClientEarth, an environmental law charity. "What we've seen of the actual plan is that there is a target on reducing carbon intensity by 2025 but we can't tell what exactly that means in total emissions."

In September, President Xi Jinping announced that China would aim for carbon neutrality by 2060, and a peak in emissions by 2030. The carbon neutrality announcement led many to expect there would be sharper targets.

Government planners offered a few more specifics in a summary of the new five-year plan. It sets a target for non-fossil energy to account for 20% of total energy consumption by 2025, which will require further investment in solar and wind energy. It did not mention any ban on new coal projects, which experts say would be a significant step.

China obtains 60% of its power from coal and is the world's biggest source of climate-changing industrial pollution. As a result, its carbon intensity is higher than any other country.

Climate change experts say the new plan does not include indicators previously given by the government, such as a 5-year GDP target, which would set more concrete limits since carbon intensity is calculated using GDP.

Lauri Mlylyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air in Helsinki, said the lack of such concrete numbers could be good because it could offer the government more flexibility in pursuing green policies. (AP)

Officials seeking answers: The National Science Foundation said Friday that it could cost up to \$50 million just to clean up the debris at a renowned radio telescope that collapsed last year in Puerto Rico, adding that investigations into what caused its cables to fail are still ongoing.

The update is part of a report that the federal agency, which owns the telescope, had to submit to Congress as the investiga-

tion continues into the Arecibo telescope. It was until recently the world's largest radio telescope and was used to study pulsars, detect gravitational waves, search for neutral hydrogen and detect habitable planets, among other things.

The NSF noted that results from the forensic evaluations by engineering firms, including mapping the distribution of debris, won't be ready until late this year. In addition, the NSF said it asked the National



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Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine to launch an independent and expedited study into what caused the telescope to collapse.

"Ensuring safety has continued to be the NSF's top priority," the report stated. "This includes not only the safety of personnel on the site, but also the safety of the environment in the area and the need to address concerns about historic and cultural preservation." (AP)