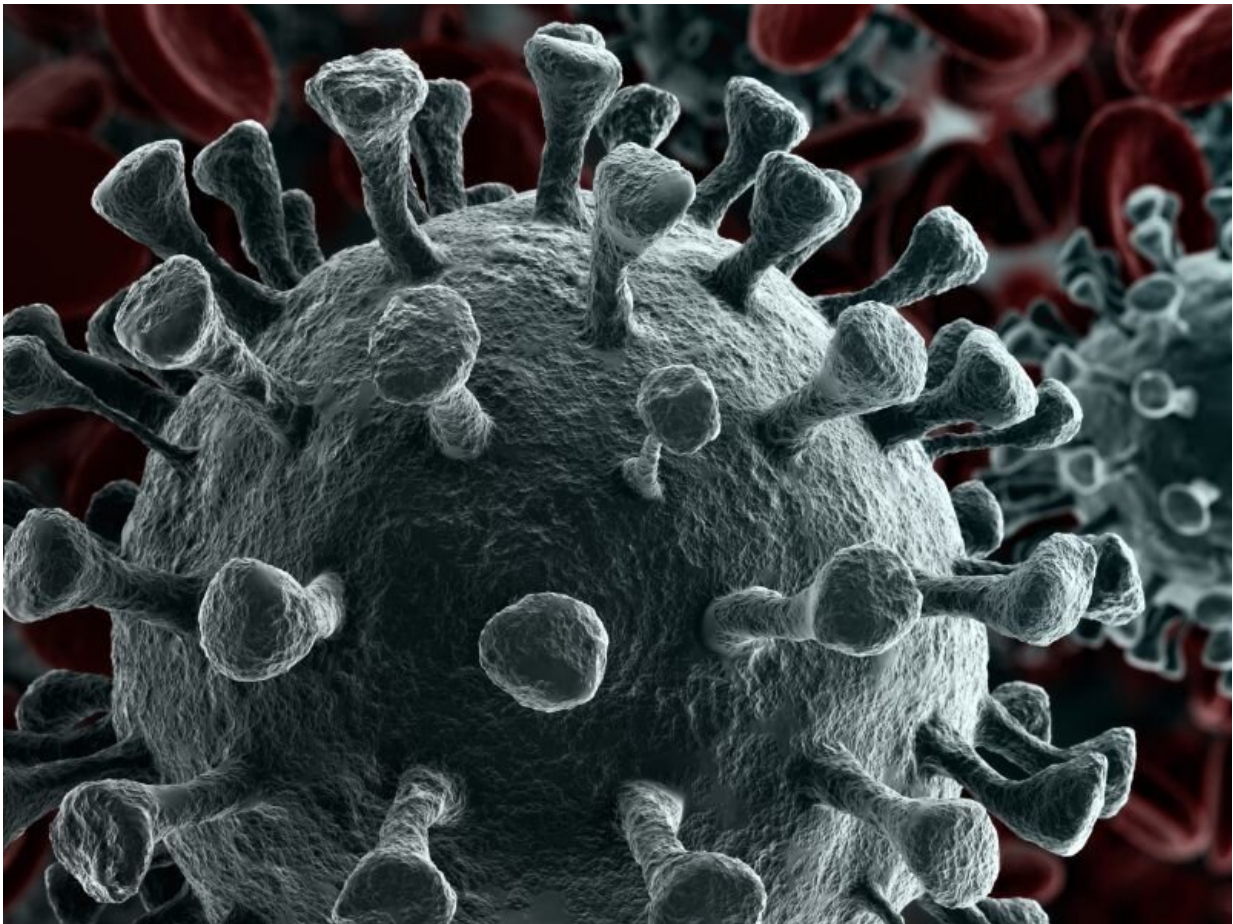


More infectious COVID variant likely widespread in the U.S., experts say

January 7 2021, by Ernie Mundell and Robin Foster



The more contagious coronavirus variant that has brought Britain to its

knees in recent weeks is showing signs that it is spreading widely throughout the United States, health officials and experts said this week.

So far, the reported cases have been mostly isolated: one in New York, one in Florida, one in Georgia and two in Colorado. But California has been another story, with 32 cases of the variant now reported in San Diego County.

"I would be surprised if that [number] doesn't grow pretty rapidly," Dr. Francis Collins, head of the National Institutes of Health, told the *Washington Post* on Wednesday.

An official from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agreed.

"Here at the CDC, we're definitely taking this seriously, and we're assuming for now that this variant is more transmissible," said Greg Armstrong, the leader of the CDC's strain surveillance program. The British variant "is probably not in every state at this point, but I think in a lot of states."

Armstrong told the *Post* that the CDC hopes to more than double the number of genomic sequences of the virus posted on public websites within the next two weeks.

"We're not sequencing enough yet, and we need to continue to build what we're doing," Armstrong said.

While the variant shows no signs of being more deadly than the original version of the virus, it could send more people into hospitals, up the number of COVID-19 deaths, and prolong the effort to reach herd immunity in this country, the *Post* reported.

Herd immunity will be reached when the virus encounters enough people with immunity that it dies out. Unfortunately, the percentage of people who need to be immune for a population to achieve herd immunity is higher for more infectious pathogens.

"We are in a race against time," said Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist with the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in Baltimore. "We need to increase our speed in which we act so that we don't allow this virus to spread further and allow this variant to become the dominant one in circulation. The clock is ticking."

In addition to the herd immunity issue, any variants could limit the power of antibody treatments because those treatments are so narrowly focused.

The implications for vaccines are less clear in the long run because the virus will continue to mutate, though the consensus is that the new coronavirus vaccines will likely still work because they trigger the creation of a broad array of neutralizing antibodies and other [immune system responses](#). In addition, the mRNA (messenger RNA) vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna can be altered if necessary, the *Post* reported.

Still, the need to vaccinate as many people as possible as quickly as possible has become more urgent, and some scientists have argued that cutting doses in half or delaying the second dose might be necessary to reach that goal. But the U.S. Food and Drug Administration this week said it would stick with the two-shot dose backed by randomized clinical trials.

"The data are really concerning. All signs right now are pointing to the fact that this [the new variant] is something we should be worried about," Mary Kathryn Grabowski, an infectious disease epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, told

the *Post*. Even a seemingly modest increase in transmissibility, she said, "can mean huge, huge numbers of cases."

Hospitalizations reach new records

A record-breaking 131,000 coronavirus hospitalizations were recorded in the United States on Tuesday as Los Angeles County began running out of oxygen and paramedics were told not to bring patients to a hospital if they have little hope of survival.

"We're no longer a wave or surge, or surge upon a surge. We really are in the middle of a viral tsunami," said Robert Kim-Farley, a medical epidemiologist at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health in Los Angeles.

In response, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a multi-pronged plan to replenish the state's oxygen supply that includes having the Army Corps of Engineers send crews to update oxygen-delivery infrastructures at several aging hospitals—five in downtown Los Angeles and two in San Bernardino. Meanwhile, state emergency teams have been deployed to refill oxygen tanks at 42 medical support units across the state and mobile oxygen systems and several hundred oxygen concentrator units are being ordered, the *Post* reported.

Things aren't much better in Arizona, which now has the nation's highest rate of coronavirus hospitalizations, the *Post* reported. The state now has 69 of every 100,000 residents hospitalized with the virus—the highest rate in the country.

"Our state is doing very little to slow transmission of the virus. We have a very lax policy environment. Our businesses are open," said Joe Gerald, a University of Arizona researcher who has been tracking the spread of the virus, told the *Post*. "The virus is just basically transmitting

almost uninhibited through our population."

The optimism that came with new coronavirus vaccines is being tempered by the fact that the United States has reached the most dangerous stage of the pandemic so far, with the deadly results of December holiday gatherings yet to arrive.

The U.S. vaccine rollout is also off to a stumbling start, with only 4.6 million Americans having received the first shot of a two-shot regimen. That number falls far short of the 20 million promised by the Trump administration by the end of 2020, although the first round of second doses of coronavirus vaccines did begin on Tuesday, *The New York Times* reported.

"We have so many crises happening simultaneously on multiple fronts," said Saskia Popescu, an epidemiologist with George Mason University in Virginia. "And all signs point to things getting a whole lot worse before they get better."

New daily deaths and cases have increased by more than 20 percent over the past week. States with the largest shares of their populations hospitalized are largely concentrated in the South and West: Arizona, Nevada, Alabama, California, Georgia, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Texas and Delaware, the *Post* reported.

A global scourge

By Thursday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 21.4 million while the death toll passed 361,300, according to a *Times* tally. On Thursday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with over 2.5 million cases; Texas with nearly 1.9 million cases; Florida with over 1.4 million cases; New York with over 1 million cases; and Illinois with more than 1 million cases.

Curbing the spread of the coronavirus in the rest of the world remains challenging.

In India, the coronavirus case count was nearly 10.4 million on Thursday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had over 7.8 million cases and nearly 199,000 deaths as of Thursday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 86.3 million on Thursday, with nearly 1.9 million deaths recorded, according to the Hopkins tally.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the new [coronavirus](#).

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