

## **BRIEF19**

*A daily review of covid-19 research and policy.*

### **POLICY BRIEFING**

**President Biden declares America on track to have 300 million vaccine doses by May, two months earlier than previously promised.**

President Biden declared on Tuesday, March 2 that the United States is currently “on track” to have enough coronavirus vaccine doses for every American adult by the end of May. This comes amid news that Merck will dedicate two of its facilities to production of Johnson & Johnson’s coronavirus vaccine, which recently received emergency authorization.

President Biden said, “As a consequence of the stepped-up process that I’ve ordered and just outlined, this country will have enough vaccine supply — I’ll say it again — for every adult in America by the end of May.” He said further that he wanted all teachers to receive at least one shot by the end of this month, directing states to prioritize teachers in their vaccination plans. While overall this was welcome news, the administration’s plan to expedite teachers’ inoculations—essentially deviating from strictly “following the science”—was criticized by some experts, including [a former member](#) of the Biden transition team covid-19 advisory board.

While this announcement represents a dramatic acceleration of the vaccination timeline, this does *not* mean that all Americans will *receive* shots by May 31; distribution and personnel requirements will likely cause delays in vaccine administration. Nevertheless, this estimate is cause for optimism, given the administration’s previous goal of having enough shots by the end of July.

Meanwhile, President Biden warned that people need to “stay vigilant” because “the fight is far from over,” with new SARS-CoV-2 variants and vaccine hesitancy posing concerns. Indeed, Texas Governor Abbott’s declaration that Texas will reopen and do away with its mask mandate raises concerns about viral spread as the nation begins to ramp up its vaccine administration. While daily caseloads have declined substantially since January, the decline appears to be leveling off, a pattern of concern to public health researchers.

Both Moderna and Pfizer pledged in February to deliver together enough vaccine to cover 200 million Americans by the end of May. With Johnson & Johnson’s vaccine authorization, as well as Biden’s invoking of the Defense Production Act to facilitate access to the necessary supplies so that Merck facilities can be rapidly equipped to manufacture the Johnson & Johnson product, the country is poised to have enough vaccine for all adults 18 and older.

While it is not clear when the nation will return to normalcy, this expedited timeline is cause for cautious optimism, particularly if states choose to adhere to covid-19 safety precautions. And for those living in states like Texas, it is important to remember that just because the Governor says masks are not required does not mean they should not be worn by choice. [4 March 2021](#). —*Miranda Yaver, PhD*

### **New rapid saliva-based test receives FDA approval.**

On Monday the US Food and Drug Administration [issued](#) an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) for a saliva-based test covid-19 developed by the University of Illinois. Although just recently approved, the covidSHIELD test has reportedly been used over one million times as part of a screening program for the University’s students. The test offers results in approximately 24 hours.

Interestingly, while University officials tout having sold the test to “dozens of organizations around the world,” the EUA [restricts](#) the laboratories able to process these samples to those approved by the University of Illinois Office of the Vice President for Economic Development and Innovation. The EUA also waives “good practice manufacturing requirements” for the continued use and distribution of this test.

In a statement, the Governor of Illinois, J.B. Pritzker, said that with the EUA designation, he will delegate \$20 million in CARES Act money for one million tests to be distributed to twelve other Illinois public universities and forty-eight community colleges. *Various*. [3 March 2021](#). —*Brief19 Policy Team*

### **Narrow majority means new limitations for stimulus check eligibility.**

After passing the House along party lines, The American Rescue Plan, President Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus package [heads](#) to the Senate, where a slimmer Democratic majority has forced compromise on a key promise. Some moderate Democrats balked at the breadth of individuals eligible to receive the \$1400 stimulus check. With every member of the caucus needed to pass the bill, changes had to be made. In the House version, checks began decreasing for individuals making more than \$75,000, and those making \$100,000 or more were deemed ineligible. For couples the phase out began at \$100,000 for couples and capped at \$200,000. The Senate's alternative removes an estimated 17 million individuals from the pool, with the lower limit still at \$75,000, but terminating at \$80,000; similarly the limits for couples would be \$150,000 and \$160,000, respectively.

In addition, the bill provides for \$400 per week in federal unemployment support through mid-August. Keep in mind, this is just the initial version of the bill to be considered in the Senate. Members from both sides of the aisles have hinted, or outright announced, plans to offer amendments that will undoubtedly delay the process. *CBSNews*. [5 March 2021](#). —*Brief19 Policy Team*

### **As restrictions ease, experts' fears grow.**

With the Johnson and Johnson vaccine becoming the third vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 now approved for emergency use in the United States and nearly one in five adults having already received at least one dose of a vaccine, state and local policymakers are beginning to [reverse](#) restrictions on social gatherings and local businesses in hopes of easing economic struggles. Cities large and small, including those in New York, Missouri and Massachusetts, have increased availability of indoor dining and bars. For example, Iowa's governor lifted the statewide mask mandate, and schools in Las Vegas are returning to physical classrooms, albeit only a few days a week to start.

Public health officials, however, remain concerned about these steps to return to life as normal could give the virus a chance to spread again. Director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, said that, "we stand to completely lose the hard-earned ground that we have gained," with such rollbacks, especially if Americans interpret these policy changes as a signal that our collective guard can finally be let down. Although reported cases and deaths have sharply declined since January, numbers remain grim overall—with around 70,000 diagnoses and 2,000 deaths daily as of late.

However, those figures have been rising slightly over the past few days, which could mark the beginning of a dangerous trend. Officials are concerned about several new variants of the virus which current vaccines may be less likely to protect against. However, leaders in many cities and states prioritizing a return to economic prosperity are willing to take the risk, hoping that the increased availability of vaccines will help to keep infection rates at least stagnant. [2 March 2021](#).

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*Brief19* is a daily executive summary of covid-19-related medical research, news, and public policy. It was founded and created by frontline emergency medicine physicians with expertise in medical research critique, health policy, and public policy.