

# Global COVID-19 death toll nears 2 million

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It was just one year ago, on January 11, 2020, when the first death attributable to COVID-19 was confirmed in a 61-year-old Chinese man known to have frequented the seafood market in Wuhan. He had several medical conditions, such as chronic liver disease, and died from heart failure and pneumonia. It is now well understood older age and various health conditions can exacerbate COVID-19 infections.

It was also exactly one year ago when the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that the genomic sequence for the novel coronavirus had been posted in the National Institute of Health's genetic sequence bank, also known as GenBank.

One year later, close to two million deaths have been reported. To be exact, the Worldometer coronavirus pandemic dashboard has the figure at 1,968,622, as of this writing. The present seven-day moving average stands at 12,941 deaths each day. It has remained over 10,000 deaths per day since November 23, as the winter surge that has swept across most of Europe and the Americas continues to take its toll on the population.

There have also been over 91.9 million COVID-19 infections reported during the pandemic. There is no doubt, given the asymptomatic nature of most cases and lack of testing in many countries, that this number is a gross underestimate. In October, Dr. Mike Ryan, the World Health Organization's Health Emergencies Program executive director, said, "Our current best estimates tell us that this virus may have infected about ten percent of the global population."

It would mean that based on an estimate of 7.6 billion people, little more than 760 million people had been infected last autumn. Yesterday saw over 663,000 infections and 15,706 deaths. The current seven-day average in daily cases is approaching three quarters of a million a day. The US, with 222,121 cases, reported 4,259 deaths. Both Germany and the UK saw over

1,000 deaths, with Europe registering 6,264 deaths in all.

The exponential growth in the UK has been fueled by the B.1.1.7 variant, which has become the most common form of the virus. The mutations in the coronavirus' spike protein have increased its transmissibility sufficiently to increase the reproduction number from the order of 1.0 to 1.5.

Given that the variant has been discovered in over thirty countries, scientists in the US and globally expect this particular version of the virus to become the dominant form, which will push already strained health resources into uncharted waters. The situation with high oxygen demand in Southern California led five hospitals in LA County to declare an "internal disaster" on December 27. Their old decrepit oxygen delivery systems in aging hospitals, long overdue for updating, are beginning to fail under stress.

On January 4, NBC TV News reported, "Hospitals struggling to provide enough oxygen for the sickest coronavirus patients in the Los Angeles area began to receive help over the weekend when US Army Corps of Engineers crew arrived to update their oxygen delivery systems. The collaboration comes as the six aging hospitals struggle to maintain oxygen pressure while treating an unprecedented number of patients with respiratory issues. Besides the shortage of oxygen, the hospitals were having difficulty keeping up with the demand for oxygen tanks for discharged patients to take home. Some COVID-19 patients can require ten times as much oxygen as a normal patient."

Given the social catastrophe being caused by an uncontrolled pandemic, there are significant calls to increasing vaccine production. At present, 30.5 million doses have been administered across 43 countries, of which 36 belong to rich-income countries. The United States has seen close to ten million vaccines given, according to a state-by-state tally by Bloomberg and

the CDC. The UK has given 2.84 million doses, reaching 4.19 per 100 people so far. The EU began its vaccine rollout on December 27. As of January 11, only Denmark has managed to give 2 percent of its population at least one dose.

China's Sinovac and the UK's AstraZeneca have submitted applications for their respective vaccines to the WHO for evaluation and licensure across the EU. Currently, Pfizer and Moderna have received approval. Yet, both of the latest newcomers have demonstrated mixed results, making their efficacy challenging to interpret.

Meanwhile, efforts are underway to begin research in addressing the origin of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus that causes COVID-19. After WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus expressed his disappointment for last week's failure by Chinese officials to grant final permission to an international team of researchers to enter the country and begin their investigation into the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the Associated Press reported that these experts would arrive on Thursday in Wuhan and meet with their Chinese counterparts.

In an attempt to control the narrative, in a public relations maneuver, foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, after finally approving the visit, hailed it as an opportunity "to exchange views with Chinese scientists and medical experts on scientific cooperation on the tracing of the origin of the new coronavirus." Though the country has managed to stem new domestic transmission cases through rigorous public health initiatives, a rise in new infections of COVID-19 in the Hebei province surrounding Beijing has prompted health authorities to impose recent lockdowns.

Citizens in Shijiazhuang, Hebei's capital, have been barred from leaving, and public transports have been shut down. Health officials in Langfang City, located approximately 56 kilometers south of Beijing, have told its nearly 5 million residents to remain home for the next seven days.

According to Reuters, it had been more than five months since 127 cases had been reported on July 30 that a series of new infections began to surface in the port city of Dalian in Liaoning in mid-December. As of January 10, there have been 85 new local cases of COVID-19, of which 82 were in Hebei. The National Health Commission indicated there had been 18

imported infections. Still, Chinese authorities are scrambling to oversee emergency planning as it attempts to dissuade traveling during the Lunar New Year.



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