

Dr. Michael Osterholm warns of massive spring surge of coronavirus in the US

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January was a fierce month for the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Over 6 million cases of COVID-19 were reported, and more than 95,000 people succumbed to their infections. In a recent interview on “Meet the Press,” Dr. Michael Osterholm, a member of Joe Biden’s coronavirus transition team, warned that the United States had to prepare for a potentially massive surge that could hit the country in the next few weeks.

Currently, there have been 26.8 million cases of COVID-19 reported and 453,000 deaths directly attributed to the virus. Since their peak in early January, cases have been declining to reach early December levels, with the seven-day moving average registering at 150,000 cases per day, a 32 percent decline over two weeks. Deaths are at their peak with over 3,300 per day on a seven-day moving average. It is expected that these will follow the decline in cases as they lag behind new infection numbers by two to three weeks. Cell phone data has shown a slowdown in the population’s movement since the holidays contributing to these trends.

As hospitals and health care workers have seen a break in the punishing number of cases that have left them exhausted and shaken, governors and state officials are seizing on these trends to begin relaxing mitigation measures. For example, Michigan and Illinois have opened up indoor dining. Illinois will allow parties of 10 people to sit inside restaurants and bars.

Foremost on the minds of politicians is seeing schools return to in-person education. However, attempts at bringing teachers back into schools are meeting with fierce opposition in Chicago.

Speaking Sunday on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” former Biden adviser Dr. Michael Osterholm said,

“We’re all loosening up right now. We all want to end our pandemic fatigue and our pandemic anger that don’t believe the pandemic’s even real. But we have got to turn that ship around, too. ... As fast as we are opening restaurants, we’re likely to be closing them in the near term.” Having previously recommended keeping vaccinations on track with two-dose regimens per their schedule, Dr. Osterholm is now calling for giving as many people, especially the most vulnerable, one dose of the vaccine before the next surge that he said is surely coming.

Dr. Osterholm voiced genuine concern that the spring wave will have a catastrophic impact on health care systems, worse than the winter surge, with peaks in hospitalizations reaching over 130,000 admissions. Recognizing that a lockdown is not forthcoming from this administration, he explained that even with the single dose’s reduced efficacy, it would help avert death and severe illness for those at the highest risk. The urgency to administer these vaccines immediately is paramount, he emphasized.

“The surge that is likely to occur with this new variant from England is going to happen in the next six to 14 weeks. If we see that happen, we are going to see something that we have not seen yet in this country. Imagine,” he said, “you and I are sitting on a beach with blue skies and it’s 70 degrees. But I see a category five hurricane or higher 450 miles offshore. Telling people to evacuate on that nice blue-sky day is going to be hard. But I can also tell you that hurricane is coming.”

Despite Osterholm’s urgent warning, only 25.5 million people have received one or both doses of the vaccine in the United States, according to the *Washington Post*’s vaccination tracker. Close to 6 million people have received both doses of either the

Pfizer or Moderna vaccine. Last week's average of 1.32 million doses per day was 3 percent down from the prior week. Johnson & Johnson's vaccine has yet to receive emergency authorization from the Food and Drug Administration.

Supply issues continue to plague vaccine allocation to the states, creating chaos in the appointment systems. According to the *New York Times*, in Erie County, New York, seven days of appointments were canceled, affecting over 8,000 people because the state had sent fewer vaccines than the county had ordered. Beaufort Memorial Hospital in South Carolina had to cancel thousands of appointments through March 30 when they received notification that the vaccines they had anticipated were not delivered. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that San Francisco's public health department would run out of vaccines on Thursday.

Dr. Leana Wen, a public health professor at George Washington University, told the *Financial Times*, "The Biden administration said it inherited no national distribution strategy, but if that is the case, how did we get to 1 million vaccinations a day, and why are we still targeting that number? We should be aiming for at least 2 million doses a day, if not 3 million."

It is always easier to blame the previous administration. A senior administration official said, "We inherited 57 different distribution strategies, some which were working and some of which weren't, and that's what we had to work with." Regardless, the Biden administration has chosen to avoid a national lockdown, which could avert the aforementioned impending crisis. Preparations must be made to protect the population rather than continuing with an ad hoc approach to distributing vaccines while pushing to open schools and businesses throughout the country.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website, the number of reported cases of the B.1.1.7 (UK variant) has climbed to 467 after first being detected in Colorado on December 30. The numbers are rising fastest in Florida, which now has had 147 detected cases. Yet, as Dr. Osterholm indicated, the US is flying blind, as it lacks a robust tracking system for detecting these variants. Still, the CDC and many other epidemiologists have indicated that by March the B.1.1.7 variant, which is 50 percent more contagious and 30 percent more lethal than the "wild type," will be the dominant mutation in the

country.

Two other states, Maryland and South Carolina, have also reported the South African variant, while Minnesota has detected the Brazilian variant. The concern raised with these two variants is their ability to possibly evade immune detection. Manaus, Brazil, which scientists assumed had reached herd immunity over the summer, is suffering a catastrophic resurgence of COVID-19 infections that has seen their hospitals inundated and medicinal oxygen exhausted. Despite early warnings portending a second crisis, authorities chose to let their guard down and return to business as usual.



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