

US ends free rapid antigen tests as CDC sabotages the fight against COVID

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The Biden administration halted the program that offered Americans free at-home rapid COVID-19 tests on Friday, following the new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that lumps together COVID with every other respiratory pathogen.

The CDC formally abandoned the requirement of five-day isolation after a positive COVID test, thus enabling employers to force workers to remain at their job irrespective of the fact that they have been infected with a highly contagious virus known to cause harm to every organ system in the human body, whether or not they become severely ill in the acute phase of their infection.

The CDC policy shift is itself the inevitable outcome of Biden's declaration last year of an end to the pandemic. The population will have to fend for themselves against the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus, as even the meager spending on rapid antigen tests ends.

The administration seeks to make the pandemic invisible even though the virus continues to infect hundreds of thousands of Americans daily, more than a thousand a week are still dying and the number affected by Long COVID continues to multiply.

Even the CDC's Long COVID tracker bears witness to the fact that cases of Long COVID in January 2024 had reached pandemic highs, with both a massive toll on the population's health, as well as noticeable economic consequences.

In a recent webinar by the New York State Insurance Fund (NYSIF), a governmental insurance carrier that provides workers' compensation and disability benefits for employers in New York state, David Cutler, a Harvard professor of Applied Economics, reviewed the economic impact of Long COVID, noting that there were at least 15 million adults (five to six percent of the population) with the debilitating condition, most in prime working ages.

Cutler explained that the largest sector affected by Long COVID has been healthcare itself, with healthcare

workers comprising over 12 percent of all Long COVID adults. Approximately 80 percent of the Long COVID adults are experiencing some limitation, while one-fifth, almost 3 million people, have significant limitations.

He estimated three kinds of costs due to Long COVID: The health cost in terms of human welfare, \$2.2 trillion; another \$1 trillion in lost earnings for people who missed work or earned less; and, finally, the cost of health treatment, projected at \$0.6 trillion. The total cost of Long COVID adds up to \$3.8 trillion, \$11,000 for every person in America, or 17 percent of GDP.

Cutler also stated that the job market has yet to rebound to the pre-pandemic normal, with approximately 500,000 to 750,000 people out of the labor force due to COVID-related work absence and up to two million affected partially, compelled to work reduced hours.

The US is not unique in the economic impact of the pandemic. A recent report from Germany underscores the international dimension of the ongoing COVID pandemic.

The report noted that in 2023, German employees experienced 20 days of work absence due to illness which contributed to the country's recent recession. This figure was far and above even the high figure of 15 days per employee in 2022, and is the highest figure since records began being kept.

The study conducted by the Association of Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies (VFA), reported that the "significant loss of work led to considerable losses in production. Without the above-average sick days, the German economy would have grown by almost 0.5 percent. If sickness rates had not been so high again, around 26 billion euros would have been generated additionally in 2023. Instead of a mild recession, there would have been an increase of almost half-percent in 2023." The projected increase of 0.5 percent turned into a decline of 0.3 percent.

The report also noted that the health insurance sector lost €5 billion over the last two years and there was a €15 billion reduction in tax revenues. Many of the sectors in which absences were reported came from vehicle construction, mechanical engineering, metal, electrical, pharmaceutical and chemical industries. The Kiel Institute for the World Economy placed the economic damage at around €32 billion to €36 billion. The insurance company DAK-Gesundheit said that most of the absences were due to illness from respiratory diseases. However, mental illness was also contributing to these, a condition known to be involved in or exacerbated by Long COVID.

Despite President Joe Biden's attempt to sell another Hollywood dreamscape when it comes to the economy, the *Harvard Business Manager* wrote in December 2023 that companies are facing the ramification of ignoring the enormous burden of Long COVID "for too long." It cited research conducted by scientists at Jena University Hospital, who found that COVID infections in workers led to substantial diminishment in their cognitive performance. The subjects "processed visual information more slowly and felt more exhausted than a control group of the same size the magazine said.

Kathrin Finke, the psychological director of Jena's Long COVID clinics, told the magazine, "We interpret this evidence of chronically diminished brain activity in Long COVID, primarily manifesting as slowed information processing." The condition is known as brain fog and, with post-exertional malaise that impacts laborious tasks, is quite common with Long COVID patients.

Harvard Business Manager stated, "The consequences for employers have not yet been fully researched. However, there is growing evidence that Long COVID's effect could have a more lasting impact on the economy than the lockdowns. A virus that slows down cognitive processes, leading to persistently higher absenteeism and increased occupational disability, is a concerning prospect for the business world."

These concerns raised by the financial sector are all that matters to the Biden administration and the CDC. Ending the five-day isolation policy after a diagnosis of COVID infection or exposure strengthens the ability of companies to strongarm their employees back to work and offset the impact of employee absenteeism on their bottom dollar.

Biden has refused to address the ongoing COVID pandemic in any real meaningful and only offering only banalities like COVID "no longer controls our lives." Coming from a president who proudly declares himself a

"capitalist," this was directed to the financial oligarchs. Tellingly, CDC's policy change came the same week as the State of the Union speech, in which Biden made zero mention of the impact Long COVID continues to have on millions of Americans and tens of millions more across the world.

Biden failed to mention that more died on his watch than even under Trump, despite the vaccines, while the administration has dismantled the entire public health apparatus that has tracked the virus except for the wastewater surveillance, which is completely being ignored.

Boston University epidemiologist Ellie Murray recently commented on social media regarding the CDC and administration's policies:

All pandemics end eventually. Some, like SARS, end with the rapid elimination of disease. Others like the plague, end with the disease finally fading into obscurity. Still others, like the 1918 influenza pandemic, see the disease growing milder without disappearing. And some, like smallpox, continue to cause high levels of illness, death, and disability, until we all agree that enough is enough and take action.

With nearly as many hospitalizations in January 2024 as in January 2023, it's clear COVID is not growing milder and it's not fading away. The real question, then, is not whether COVID is still a pandemic, but how much COVID illness and death are we willing to accept?

This Friday's demonstration by grassroots Long COVID organizations will call attention to the plight of COVID long haulers and the need to address their medical needs, from diagnosis to treatment to establishing diagnostic codes that can be used to adjudicate their disabilities. However, what the State of the Union address and the CDC's policies show is that the struggle to address Long COVID requires a political struggle against the profit-mad ruling elite.



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