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Covid-19: US cases surge but vaccine distribution is slow

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Cases of covid-19 have continued to surge in the US as only five million people were vaccinated by the end of 2020, against the 20 million promised by President Donald Trump.

President Elect Joe Biden has promised to deliver 100 million doses of the vaccine in his first 100 days in office, which will begin on 20 January. There is no national plan for distributing vaccines. Each state is allotted doses based on their populations and leaders must then decide how to get the vaccines to its people.

Francis Collins, head of the National Institutes of Health, said in a live streamed interview with the *Washington Post* on 6 January that it had been “a rocky beginning” but that he hoped to see a million people being vaccinated every day.¹ Collins is the boss of Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and a frequently quoted expert on covid-19.

Collins was asked about suggestions that only the first dose of the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine be given or that half doses of the Moderna vaccine be used. He said that the two dose regimen of both vaccines was 94% to 95% effective, which he called a “breath taking” success, and that was what should be used.

Vaccine is to be given first to healthcare workers and residents of long term care facilities, then to the elderly, essential workers, and people with underlying conditions that put them at higher risk, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.²

The Trump administration said yesterday (6 January) that it would start a programme to give out vaccines through 19 major pharmacy chains, mainly to healthcare workers and the elderly.³

The US has the world’s highest number of cases, deaths, and new infections with covid-19.

On 6 January, the US had a total of 21.3 million cases, nearly 360 000 deaths, and more than 131 000 people hospitalised. Cases are rising in 40 states. Arizona, California, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Arkansas are the hardest hit.⁴

California, which has a population of 40 million, reported it had 2.5 million cases. Many hospitals were reported to have no capacity left. In Los Angeles, hospitals were rationing oxygen and emergency workers were told not to transport patients unlikely to survive to hospital.⁵

The UK variant of covid-19 has been detected in at least five states, but the US does not have as strong a testing system for genomic variants of the virus. US health leaders such as Collins and Fauci have said they think the currently approved vaccines will be effective against the variant.

1 Video Highlights. NIH Director Francis Collins in conversation with Frances Stead Seller. *Washington Post*. 6 January 2021. www.washingtonpost.com/pr/2021/01/04/path-forward-combating-covid-19-with-national-institutes-health-director-francis-collins-md/.

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. When vaccine is limited, who gets vaccinated first. 31 December 2020. www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations.html#:~:text=People%20aged%2075%20years%20and,offered%20vaccination%20in%20Phase%201a.

3 Covid-19 live updates: More US pharmacies to start vaccinating high-risk groups. *New York Times*. 6 January 2021. www.nytimes.com/live/2021/01/06/world/covid-19-coronavirus.

4 Coronavirus in the US: latest map and case count. 6 January 2021. www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html.

5 Guttman M, Castillejo E, Rivas A. With LA hospitals overwhelmed by covid-19, EMS told not to transport certain patients. *ABC News*. 5 January 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/la-hospitals-overwhelmed-covid-19-ems-told-transport/story?id=75060756>.