Amid COVID-19 resurgence, fewer deaths. Dr. Fauci explains why.

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Recent COVID-19 data show there’s a lower ratio of people dying from the disease daily than there was when New York was a hot spot early in the nation’s experience with the pandemic.

Last week, the U.S. had about 50,000 newly diagnosed COVID-19 cases daily, with about 600 deaths reported each day. At its height this spring, about 30,000 newly diagnosed COVID-19 cases were reported daily, along with about 2,500 deaths.

There are three things driving the lower death ratio, Anthony S. Fauci, MD, told viewers during a JAMA Network™ livestreamed video interview in which he discussed the latest developments in the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, the people now initially getting diagnosed are about a decade and a half younger than those who were initially being diagnosed in the spring, said Dr. Fauci, a member of the White House coronavirus task force and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). Data shows that the disease is less fatal for younger people.

Second, he said, we now know how devastating the disease can be for the elderly and those with underlying conditions. He said nursing homes are protecting residents much better now than they were earlier in the pandemic and that the nation is doing a better job of protecting the elderly and those with underlying conditions in their own homes.

Lastly, Dr. Fauci cautioned that the ratio of new cases to deaths reported daily could change because it may be a substantial lag before the data shows a higher death rate.
“We may be seeing a delay,” Dr. Fauci said. “So, be careful. As the weeks go by, we may be seeing the uptick of the deaths.”

You can stay up to speed on the AMA’s COVID-19 advocacy efforts and track the fast-moving pandemic with the AMA's COVID-19 resource center, which offers a library of the most up-to-date resources from JAMA Network™, the CDC, and the World Health Organization.

Public health measures aid reopening

During the JAMA Network livestreamed video, Dr. Fauci talked about vaccine phase 3 clinical trials for several potential vaccines continuing to be on track for late July and early August.

He also discussed the idea of pool testing that would act as a surveillance system to get a feel of what is going on in the community by pulling together samples from a number of people and using one test for the pooled sample, saving resources, time, equipment and money. For example, if a pooled test that includes 20 people comes back negative, you know all 20 don’t have the virus. If the test is positive, you would then go back and retest people individually.

Dr. Fauci also discussed vaccine distribution, COVID-19 treatments, improving the quality of polymerase chain reaction testing (PCR) and serology, and his view on reopening schools and colleges this fall.

He called the number of new cases last week “quite disturbing” as the U.S. set new records nearly every day.

“That clearly is not the right direction,” Dr. Fauci said. He noted that while Florida, California, Texas and Arizona accounted for about half of the new daily cases, the high rates mean the rest of the country still faces a threat from the virus.

“Other areas become vulnerable because even though we are a very heterogenous country, we are not without connection to each other so the whole enterprise could be at risk,” Dr. Fauci said. “You’ve got to remember that we’re all in this together and we have to take some societal responsibility … I hope these sobering numbers that we’re seeing are getting people to be jolted into realizing that not only do we have a responsibility to ourselves, we have a societal responsibility to help put an end to this epidemic.”

Dr. Fauci was pleased to see less division among political leaders on the issue of wearing masks and encouraging the public to do so. He said mask-wearing is one of the few tools we have to help
prevent the disease from spreading now. Dr. Fauci said there shouldn’t be a mindset that there are opposing forces—those favoring public health and those who want to open up the country and get back to normal.

“They are not opposing. The best way, as a vehicle, to opening the country in a safe way is to prudently use public health measures,” he said. “So, it’s not public health against opening. It’s the public health measures to help you to open. … They are complementary forces in many respects.”

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