Mira Irons, MD, on CDC do's and don'ts for the fully vaccinated

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Featured topic and speakers

In today's COVID-19 Update, Mira Irons, MD, AMA's chief health and science officer, says that one year after the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, there's a light at end of the tunnel, but safety measures should still be followed. Dr. Irons also reviews the latest COVID-19 numbers and trending topics.

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Speakers

- Mira Irons, MD, chief health and science officer, AMA

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today we have our weekly look at the numbers, trends and latest news about COVID-19 with AMA's chief health and science officer, Dr. Mira Irons in Chicago. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer, also in Chicago. Well, one year ago this week, the world began to shut down. The pandemic closed borders and halted air travel. Cities around the world went into lockdown. I don't think that anyone could have imagined that a year later we'd see over 525,000 deaths and such disruption in our lives. Dr. Irons, how would you describe the situation as it is right now?

Dr. Irons: Todd, you're absolutely right. I don't think we would have imagined that we'd see over a half a million deaths. And we wouldn't have imagined that we are where we are now, that this has been a year. And in many cases, it seems like it hasn't been a year, but it seems like it's almost been a lifetime because our lives have been so changed and affected by this. I think the easiest way to
describe where we are now is, to me, we’re beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel, but we’re not there yet. Our behavior can actually control a lot of what we’re going to see over the next few months. And so it's really important to understand the numbers and what's happening in the country.

So in terms of numbers, today, 28,999,705 people have been infected, have been confirmed to have COVID. And the deaths as of this morning are 525,035 deaths. Cases are still low, as they have been in months, but after weeks of steep declines, the progress is slow nationally, and some cities are beginning to backslide. Over the past week, there's been an average of 60,258 cases per day, which is a decrease of 11% from the average two weeks earlier, but still, that's a lot of cases. And that's a lot of COVID activity in communities. On Saturday there were 56,606 new cases reported and 1,459 new coronavirus deaths. Though fatalities have started falling, in part because of the vaccination campaign at nursing homes, it remains routine for 2,000 deaths to be reported in a single day across the country. And that's just unacceptable and we have to get past that.

Unger: Yeah, it is a little bit frustrating because you see on one hand, people feel great, the numbers are coming down. However, we stalled and it's too early right now to start giving up those mitigation measures because we don't want to put ourselves back in another surge fueled by these variants that we've seen. So, hey, spring breakers, hold off just a little bit longer while we continue to roll out the vaccine. Well, speaking of vaccines, can you tell us what's happening in the vaccine world this week?

Dr. Irons: Yeah, so good news. So in the United States, 69% of the public now plans to get vaccinated or already has, which is up 60% in November, according to a new survey, which is good news, because several months ago we were talking about concerns that people wouldn't be lining up for vaccines. For the first time, the country's administering more than 2 million vaccine doses on average each day. And as the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is distributed, that number could climb higher. We're seeing providers administering about 2.16 million doses per day on average. On Saturday, the CDC said that more than 87 million people have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, including about 29.8 million people who have been fully vaccinated. As we know, the FDA authorized Johnson & Johnson's vaccine on February 27, but those doses do not yet appear in the CDC data. So I think more news to follow, but it's moving in the right direction.

Unger: That's great. And it is good to see the acceleration there in vaccinations. Well, you did mention the CDC, and I wanted to spend some time on some new guidance coming from the CDC about what can you do once you're vaccinated? What can you tell us about that?

Dr. Irons: Absolutely. So the CDC just issued guidance on what people who are fully vaccinated can do. Now, the first thing I want to say is that what does fully vaccinated mean? So people are considered fully vaccinated for COVID-19 two weeks after they've received the second dose in a two-dose series of a vaccine, so either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine or two weeks after they received a single-dose vaccine, which is Johnson & Johnson/Janssen right now. So the CDC guidance that has come out that has said fully vaccinated people can visit with other fully vaccinated
people indoors, no masks or distancing, visit with unvaccinated people from a single household, if low risk, indoors, no masks and no distancing, and refrain from quarantine and testing following a known exposure to COVID-19 if they're asymptomatic.

Now, what they should continue to do, however, is this opens things up a little, but they should continue, fully vaccinated people, should continue to take precautions in public. And precautions mean mask and distancing, masks, distance and other prevention measures when visiting with unvaccinated people at high risk for severe disease, or who have an unvaccinated household member who's at high risk for severe disease, and continue with masks, distance and other prevention measures when with visiting with unvaccinated people from multiple households. Continue to avoid medium and large size in-person gatherings, get tested if you experience COVID-19 symptoms. And the guidance is on the CDC website, so there's a lot here that I just talked about. So people may want to go to the CDC website and take a look at that.

**Unger:** I think that's really good that it's been clarified because you've seen a lot of different guidance on that, and I think it's a lot more clear now. And my 86-year-old mom, clear to hang out with her other 86-year-old friends who have all been vaccinated and are fully vaccinated at this point. So that's great news. Any other key messages that the AMA wants people to hear this week, Dr. Irons?

**Dr. Irons:** Sure. So on Tuesday, March 2nd, three leading national health care advocacy organizations urged all health care professionals to redouble efforts to collect and report race and ethnicity data when administering COVID-19 vaccinations. In an open letter, the American Medical Association, the American Nurses Association and the American Pharmacists Association noted that improved data collection is critical to ensure access to vaccines in vulnerable populations and improving vaccine confidence. On Wednesday, March 3rd, a new AMA analysis was released that showed that Medicare spending on physician services declined an estimated $9.4 billion between January and June 2020. The new report, titled Changes in Medicare Physician Spending During the COVID Pandemic reveals the economic impact the pandemic has had on medical practices as expenses have spiked and revenues have dropped. And I'll quote AMA president Dr. Susan Bailey. "For practices that have struggled to remain viable as the pandemic stretches on, many will face a difficult and precarious road to recovery. The AMA report adds new insight on the economic impact of the pandemic that has threatened the viability of physicians who participate in Medicare."

**Unger:** Well, thank you so much for that news as well. That concludes our COVID-19 update for today. Dr. Irons, appreciate your perspective as always. For additional information on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us. Please take care.

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