Mira Iron, MD, urges caution to prevent COVID surge in spring

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Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 Update, Mira Irons, MD, AMA’s chief health and science officer, talks about the need to continue to follow COVID safety mandates and get the COVID vaccine so as to increase the possibility of a return to a bit of normalcy by the Fourth of July holiday. Dr. Irons also recapped COVID-19 numbers and trending topics related to the pandemic over the past week.

Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center.

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 in Chicago. Dr. Irons, big news from President Biden last week. He said he wants to make sure that everybody who's eligible for a vaccine can start to get one May 1st, and that we're aiming for a big 4th of July celebration where we can get together in small groups. How do we get there from where we are right now?

**Dr. Irons:** We get there really thoughtfully. I think we have to be really careful and follow all the rules, and that'll increase our chances of getting there. So as you said, last week, the president said he'd order states to make all adults eligible for the vaccine by May 1st, and that some return to normalcy might be possible, but I think the emphasis is on the word might or may, be possible by July 4th. He
said July 4th with your loved ones is the goal. He was careful to point out though that Americans should expect to get in line for a vaccine by May 1st, but not expect to be vaccinated by this date. If you look at...There are caveats.

Before last week, they announced that by the end of May, we would have enough doses to inoculate every adult. And so it is going to take time to get those doses. It's also going to take time for people to make appointments and get vaccinated. And so, hopefully, I think over the last few weeks, we've seen the numbers picking up and more sites being available, and hopefully that'll continue. Also of note, the president said the federal government would create a website that would allow Americans to search for available vaccines, make the vaccine available to more pharmacies, double the numbers of mass vaccination sites, and certify more people. And this just happened last week, including dentists, paramedics, veterinarians and physicians assistants to deliver shots in arms.

Unger: That is so important because I think a lot of people have experienced, and what you read about, that sense of Hunger Games out there trying to hunt for an appointment. And that's just not very efficient. So that's encouraging. Are we on pace for the goals that President Biden sets out?

Dr. Irons: I think that we are. The vaccine supply appears to be on track to fulfill these goals. And what's happened until this time was demand was much higher than supply, and we've been waiting for the supply to start to increase and meet the demand. And I think that's where we're getting. We still need the infrastructure, however, in place to administer the doses and overcome reluctance in large sectors of the population. But we also have to make sure that the infrastructure's in place to administer doses to everyone in the population and ensure that equity and that minority and minoritized populations also have easy access to vaccines.

The CDC said on Saturday about 69.8 million people have received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine and 37.5 million have been fully vaccinated by one of the three authorized vaccines. That's 21% of the population has had one dose and 11.3% fully vaccinated. So we still have a way to go. And that totals to more than 107 million doses have been administered. The CDC is now including the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in its data. And clearly, that's a one-shot vaccine so the numbers of fully vaccinated people will increase as that starts to get into the rotation.

Unger: And yes, you can definitely feel an acceleration. And that's not imaginary because the vaccinations have really ramped up over 50%. And that's quite a bit more, so that's a great sign that we are tracking toward those goals. Let's look at specific states. We were talking before we started recording about some of the visuals that we're seeing from spring breakers, so to speak, and hoping that is not going to eliminate our chance for progress. What are you seeing state by state?

Dr. Irons: Well, as the supplies are increasing, the states are also starting to open up. We've talked about this before states, could only make appointments for vaccinations based on the supply that they were getting. So now that the supplies are increasing, states are starting to change their eligibility guidance, guidelines. Alaska became the first state to open up its eligibility to everyone 16 and over.
Utah announced that all adults would be eligible for the vaccine on April 1st, and others like Colorado say they're not far behind. Michigan is expanding vaccine eligibility to everyone age 50 and over as of March 22nd, and everyone 16 and over from April 5th.

Some setbacks in other countries. Ireland has joined several other European countries in suspending the use of the COVID-19 vaccine by Oxford/AstraZeneca on Sunday, citing reports of unusual blood clotting problems among four people who recently received shots in Norway. Now this is a safety pause. It's framed as a cautionary step while major public health agencies, including the WHO, have pointed out that millions of people have received the vaccine without experiencing blood clotting issues, and experts have not found a causative link between any of the vaccines and the condition. So it's a safety pause to investigate those cases a little further.

**Unger:** That is disconcerting because reading over the weekend, we're back to lock down scenarios in some countries. So that's difficult among all the optimism that we have here in the states. Well, we talked last week that we're just on really the one year anniversary of the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 a pandemic. And we see a lot of coverage comparing where we are now to where we were then. How are we looking relative to cases, deaths? Are we still at that high level, even though we're seeing declines across the country?

**Dr. Irons:** Well we're continuing to see declines, but the numbers are still higher than we'd like them. So today's numbers, 29,439,390 confirmed cases and 534,890 deaths in the U.S. The global numbers are 119.9+ million cases and 2.65+ million deaths. March began with some of the lowest case numbers the country has seen since last fall, though the pace of progress has slowed. And I think that's the concern now and that's where we have to really be careful. At least 1,846 new coronavirus deaths and 49,728 new cases were reported on Saturday. And those numbers are just too high. They signify that there's still active coronavirus activity in the United States, and so we really have to be careful.

Over the past week, there's been an average of 55,215 cases a day. That is a decrease of 19% from the average of two weeks earlier. We've also seen a seven day decrease of 11% in new hospitalizations and a 19.3% decrease in deaths on a seven day average. So while those are really really good numbers, we really... Things are at a high enough level though, that it can tip the curve to go in a new direction, so we have to be careful.

**Unger:** Yeah, important. Still here in Chicago, it's classified as very high in terms of the rate. So I think that's probably why our mayor has had a surprise dyeing of the Chicago River, so not to create a crowd for that, but to keep people's spirits up regardless. What are the other risks that you're seeing out there? Certainly around travel, that's a big question mark. And we're seeing an uptick in travel, with air travel, for instance, is being at its highest level since last March. What are the risks that we're facing right now?

**Dr. Irons:** Well, you worry. We worry about St. Patrick's Day, but we also really worry about
upcoming spring breaks. And we've probably all seen the media footage from the beaches. The CDC has said that this is not the time to travel, particularly with highly contagious variants running wild across the country. You know, Dr. Walensky, the director of the CDC, last week said, "We're very worried about transmissible variants. A lot of them have come through our travel corridors. So we're being extra cautious right now with travel." If you look at what the drivers are, the latest college super-spreader is Duke. All Duke University, undergraduate students, about 6,000, living on campus and residence halls or on-campus apartments were told last Saturday to remain in their residences for the next seven days following an outbreak at the school. More than 180 students were recently required to isolate following positive COVID-19 tests reportedly linked to frat parties. And 200 students were in quarantine following the university's contact tracing efforts.

You know, we worry about dropping mandates too soon. We know that states are dropping mask and dining restrictions at the one year mark. And Dr. Fauci warned on Sunday against loosening restrictions prematurely. His words are, "Even though the decline was steep, we absolutely need to avoid the urge to say, 'Oh, everything is going great.'" You know, when you get a plateau of around 60,000 new infections per day, there's always a risk of another surge. And we know that can happen. I believe yesterday, Italy began another lockdown for three weeks because they've seen a recent surge. They had pulled back on health measures, some restaurants and bars opened, and many young people in particular stopped wearing masks. So we see that it can happen. We're just asking for caution also.

**Unger:** That's a good word right now. Stick to the rules. We're not through this yet.

**Dr. Irons:** Right.

**Unger:** Well, thank you so much, Dr. Irons, for your weekly perspective. That's it for today's COVID-19 Update. We'll be back with another segment tomorrow. In the meantime, for resources on COVID-19 visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us. Please take care.

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