Mira Irons, MD, discusses vaccination efforts and Delta variant

Watch the AMA’s daily COVID-19 update, with insights from AMA leaders and experts about the pandemic.

Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 Update, AMA’s Chief Health and Science Officer Mira Irons, MD, reviews COVID-19 vaccine numbers and trending topics related to the pandemic over the past week. Also covering "National Month of Action" and state-by-state vaccination progress, as well as the Delta virus variant.

Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center.

Speaker

- 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.

Dr. Irons, last week we saw President Biden declare June a national month of action as part of a renewed push to get Americans vaccinated. What is that going to look like?

Dr. Irons: Well, President Biden is facing his July 4 deadline to have 70% of U.S. adults at least partly vaccinated. And he's really working to rally the nation to meet that goal, announcing an offer of free child care for parents and caregivers while they receive their shots and a national canvassing effort, resembling a get out the vote drive. He's asking Americans to not only get vaccinated

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themselves, but also to join in the push to persuade their friends and neighbors to do so. It's aggressive. It lays out incentives. It includes incentives from sports leagues like free tickets to the Super Bowl and the Major League Baseball games. And also from private companies—United Airlines is offering a year of free flights in a sweepstakes open only to vaccinated Americans. And Anheuser-Busch has promised free beer to adults on Independence Day if the nation meets the president's goal. It also includes thousands of people knocking on doors and canvassing in neighborhoods close to walk-in clinics where people can get vaccinated.

Unger: Well, if free beer doesn't do it, I don't know what will.

Dr. Irons: Right.

Unger: This goal of 70%, are we on track to meet it or not?

Dr. Irons: It's going to be close. We're roughly on track, but one New York Times analysis suggested if the pace of adult vaccination continues, the nation will come in just shy of the target with roughly 68% of adults partly vaccinated by July 4. Reaching all eligible Americans remains a daunting task. As vaccination rates rise, the pool of the most willing adults is shrinking and rural and minority communities remain particularly difficult to reach. One element of the president's plan that we heard last week is a Shots at the Shop initiative that will engage Black-owned barbershops and beauty salons to give out educational materials and also host on-site vaccination events with local health care providers.

Unger: And that number that you quoted, 68%, it's really varying when you take a look down state by state. Can you talk a little bit about how the vaccination rates really look when you analyze that?

Dr. Irons: Yeah, absolutely. We quote numbers across the entire United States, but the reality is that as we've seen with this pandemic, there are different stories in different parts of the United States. We've definitely seen uneven vaccination rates between states. Even if the country as a whole reaches the national target, at least 30 states probably will not. And a handful are unlikely to reach the 70% mark before the end of the year. A dozen states, many of them in the Northeast, including Maine, Massachusetts and Connecticut, have already reached a benchmark of at least 70% of adults with at least one vaccine dose. But in the South, that marker is nowhere in sight for several states. In 15 states, including Arkansas, the Carolinas, Georgia and Louisiana, about half of adults or fewer have received a dose. In two states, Alabama and Mississippi, it would take about a year to get one dose to 70% of the population at the current pace of adult administration. Mississippi currently has the country's lowest vaccination rate with 34% of the population having received at least one shot.

Unger: So I'm going to imagine that puts places like that in a lot of risk for those that are unvaccinated. What do you predict then for outbreaks in that region, particularly in the South?

Dr. Irons: Yeah, it's hard to know. As with everything with this virus, it's hard to make any predictions,
but some experts are warning that we may see infections spike in the Southern region, both because vaccination rates are low and the summer heat is driving people indoors where the virus spreads more efficiently. We’re also seeing an easing of pandemic restrictions, which will make unvaccinated people more vulnerable. However, if there is a summer surge across the South, experts believe it won’t be as grave as last summer’s because at least some people are vaccinated and treatments have improved. To avoid a summer surge, states across the South need to catch up to those in the Northeast.

**Unger:** Just at a big picture level, what are we seeing with cases and deaths at this point?

**Dr. Irons:** So cases and deaths continue to rise, but thankfully not as dramatically as they have in the past. We have, as of this morning, 33,378,859 cases and 597,984 deaths, tragically. I think we may reach that 600,000 figure at some point and I don't know that any of us could have imagined that. However, the national picture uniformly looks good right now. The country's averaging below 15,000 cases per day, the lowest since testing became widely available and cases continue to decline rapidly. Deaths are falling as are hospitalization. It does feel like a hopeful moment. New England has fared particularly well in recent weeks, six states in the region have seen cases fall by 60% or more since mid-May.

**Unger:** So in terms of potential wrenches in that progress, we are seeing the emergence of new variants, particularly one that's called the Delta variant. Can you talk about what's happening there, particularly in Britain?

**Dr. Irons:** Yeah, Britain has had one of the world's most successful COVID-19 responses in recent months. If you look at what they've been seeing, fewer than 10 Britons per day have been dying in recent weeks, down from 1,200 a day in late January. On a per capita basis, Britain's death rate last month was less than one tenth of the U.S. rate. However, they are now seeing a rise in COVID cases and the main cause appears to be the highly infectious virus variant known as Delta, which was first detected in India. Britain's recent moves to reopen society also probably play a role. The experience there also suggests that cases may soon rise in the U.S.

**Unger:** So is that kind of increase that we're seeing overseas pretty significant, something to worry about, or how do you frame that?
**Dr. Irons:** Relatively to where Britain was in January, the recent increase in COVID cases is small, but there’s still a cause for concern. As small as it may look on a chart, new COVID cases have more than doubled over the past month to more than 4,000 a day from about 2,000 a day. Pandemics feed on themselves in both directions. When new caseloads are falling, it increases the chances that they will continue to fall because fewer newly infected people are able to spread the virus to others. When caseloads are rising, the opposite occurs. Fortunately, the current surge is almost certain to cause less death than previous outbreaks because most people vulnerable to serious illness have already been vaccinated and the vaccines continue to look effective against the Delta variant.

For now, deaths have barely risen and it’s possible that they will not rise much, but it’s too soon to know. COVID death trends typically trail case trends by a few weeks. If the Delta variant ends up being significantly more severe, it could cause an increase in deaths. We should know more by next week, but the early reports from the U.K. indicate that two doses of the current vaccines in use there are highly effective against symptomatic disease so that’s just all the more reason to encourage more people to get fully vaccinated.

**Unger:** That is a piece of good news to hear that the vaccines appear to be effective against the symptomatic disease. We’ll talk more about that next week and take a look at adolescent rates here in the United States. Dr. Irons, thanks for being here and for your update. We’ll look forward to your perspective next week. In the meantime, for resources on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/covid-19. Thanks for joining us today. Please take care.

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