

LA County could reopen as early as Monday; Biden wants all US adults eligible for vaccine by May 1: COVID-19 updates

Thursday marked one year since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

Since then, life in the United States has [drastically changed](#). From remote work and school schedules to new ways to attend events and church services, COVID-19 has altered how we live. And some of the changes could go on long after the virus is gone.


Since the first case in January 2020, the U.S. has suffered a devastating loss – nearly 530,000 deaths, along with 29 million cases. And now virus variants are creeping across the nation, [a USA TODAY analysis of CDC data shows](#).

There are signs of hope. The U.S. is once again reporting less than one COVID-19 death per minute, a USA TODAY analysis of Johns Hopkins University data shows. The U.S. also reported less than 400,000 new infections in the week ending Wednesday, a level not seen since mid-October. Vaccinations are picking up speed too, and states are easing eligibility requirements to get them. In a televised address Thursday night, [President Joe Biden directed states to make all adults eligible by May 1](#).

There was some unsettling vaccine news Thursday, however, including concerns about blood clots linked to the AstraZeneca vaccine and a clinic at a supermarket ["vaccinating" with empty syringes](#).

Also in the news:

- ▶ Nearly 1 in 5 Americans — 19% — say they lost a relative or close friend to the coronavirus, [according to a new poll](#) from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The numbers were considerably higher for Black (30%) and Hispanic (29%) respondents, yet another example of the pandemic's disproportionate impact on minority groups.
- ▶ The European Medicines Agency has authorized Johnson & Johnson's one-dose COVID-19 vaccine, giving the European Union's 27 nations a fourth licensed vaccine to combat the pandemic, along with offerings from Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca-Oxford.
- ▶ Kroger said Thursday that one of its Little Clinic locations in Virginia accidentally ["vaccinated" some customers](#) with empty syringes. The Cincinnati-based grocer, which operates more than 220 Little Clinics in supermarkets in nine states, didn't say how many shots were involved but said all the clients were contacted and later given the vaccine.
- ▶ Two weeks after the second dose, evidence indicates the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is at least 97% effective in preventing symptomatic disease, severe/critical disease and death, the makers and the Israel Ministry of Health say.
- ▶ A video [that shows a ride-sharing passenger](#) ripping off her mask, coughing on a driver, attempting to steal his phone and breaking the driver's mask has prompted a police investigation and bans from both Uber and Lyft.

 **Today's numbers:** The U.S. has over 29.2 million confirmed coronavirus cases and more than 530,000 deaths, [according to Johns Hopkins University data](#). The global totals: More than 118.4 million cases and 2.62 million deaths. More than 131.1 million vaccine doses have been distributed in the U.S. and 98.2 million have been administered, [according to the CDC](#).

 **What we're reading:** USA TODAY's panel of experts have different definitions of what the end of the pandemic means. But [they agree it's getting closer](#).

USA TODAY is tracking COVID-19 news. Keep refreshing this page for the latest updates. Want more? [Sign up for our Coronavirus Watch newsletter](#) for updates to your inbox and [join our Facebook group](#).

LA County to reopen indoor dining, movie theaters as soon as Monday

Los Angeles County, once the epicenter of the pandemic, may soon open up indoor dining, movie theaters and gyms — even as soon as after this weekend.

The county could move to the "red tier" in California's tier-based system as early as Monday if the state reaches its goal of administering 2 million vaccine doses to residents in its disadvantaged areas — which appears likely to happen on Friday, [according to the Los Angeles Times](#). The county released its reopening plans, including indoor dining at the state-authorized capacity of 25% and reopening of retail at 50%.

It's a welcome sign at a county that just two months ago was getting crushed by COVID-19. In January, the county limited hospital transports to deal with overwhelming capacity and removed air quality restrictions to account for the influx of bodies in funeral homes.

Texas AG sues capital city to lift masking rules

The Texas attorney general is suing the state's capital for keeping mask mandates in place.

AG Ken Paxton [filed suit Thursday against the city of Austin and Travis County](#), seeking a temporary restraining order to block enforcement of "unlawful and invalid" mask rules that include fines for violators of up to \$2,000. The local ordinances require businesses to enforce mask requirements and for people to wear face coverings in public areas to reduce transmission of the coronavirus.

The suit argues that an executive order by Gov. Greg Abbott lifting the state's mask mandate, which went into effect Wednesday, supersedes local rules.

-- Chuck Lindell, Austin American-Statesman

Record growth for UK variant in US

The U.S. on Thursday reported a record increase of 437 cases of coronavirus variants since the previous report just two days earlier, a USA TODAY analysis of [CDC data](#) shows. [Variant cases are increasing quickly](#) even as regular coronavirus infections have been falling across most of the country.

South Dakota reported its first two cases of the B.1.1.7 variant first seen in the United Kingdom, leaving Vermont as the only state to not have a known variant case.

The U.S. now has 3,701 cases of the B.1.1.7 variant, by far the most common in the country. The number has doubled since Feb. 24, with Florida at the forefront with 690.

-- *Mike Stucka*

Biden gets high marks for pandemic response, even from some Republicans, poll says

More than six out of every 10 Americans approve of the job President Joe Biden is doing handling the pandemic, an [NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll found](#).

Results of the survey, conducted March 3-8, were released Thursday, the same day Biden signed into law a \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill and hours before he delivered a nationally televised address. The White House said the first round of [\\$1,400 coronavirus relief payments will be direct-deposited into bank accounts this weekend](#).

“This historic legislation is about rebuilding the backbone of this country,” Biden said as he signed the bill in the Oval Office.

Biden has made the pandemic response the central issue of the early part of his term, which has featured a drastic decline in COVID-19 cases and deaths after the huge post-holiday surge. The U.S. is now averaging 2.2 million vaccine shots a day, about twice the number when President Donald Trump left office Jan. 20.

Among the 62% of survey respondents who approved of Biden's handling of the pandemic, 30% were Republicans and 22% Trump supporters.

"There's a sense of progress," said Lee Miringoff, director of the Marist Institute for Public Opinion, which conducted the poll. "There are Trump people, who obviously didn't vote for (Biden), but have come on board because of COVID."

Four former presidents and their wives promote vaccinations in ads

Four of the five living former presidents and their wives have taped public service announcements urging Americans to get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible.

The PSAs from the Ad Council and the business-supported COVID Collaborative feature Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter along with first ladies Michelle Obama, Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton and Rosalynn Carter. All have received a COVID-19 vaccine.

One ad features photos of the former presidents and their spouses with syringes in their upper arms as they urge Americans to “roll up your sleeve and do your part” by getting vaccinated.

Notably absent from the ads are President Donald Trump and wife Melania Trump, who were vaccinated away from the cameras in January while he was still in office.

Game on to lights out: How sports turned upside down one year ago

For an American sporting culture accustomed to playing through pain and preserving the billions of dollars and countless livelihoods within it, the pandemic began merely as background noise. A distraction, as a football coach might say. One year and countless warning flags, shutdowns and false starts removed from March 2020, we know better. USA TODAY sports took a closer look at the unsettling days and frantic hours last March when the sports world went from game on to lights out. [Read more here.](#)

Black community fights back against vaccine lies on social media

Hairstylist Katrina Randolph has heard just about every COVID vaccine conspiracy theory making the rounds on social media, so every time a client slides into her chair, she snips away at fears and misconceptions.

No, the vaccine isn't an effort to sterilize Black people. It can't alter your DNA. It won't implant a microchip to track your movements. And no, people of color are not being used as guinea pigs. Randolph has put herself on the front lines of the Black community's fight against COVID vaccine misinformation, part of a network of barbershops and beauty salons working with Dr. Stephen B. Thomas, who runs the Maryland Center for Health Equity at the University of Maryland School of Public Health.

The Health In-Reach and Research Initiative – or HAIR – used to focus on educating people about chronic diseases such as diabetes and colon cancer, Thomas says.

Now it's taking on something just as dangerous and more insidious: [Viral misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines](#) that is contributing to [Black Americans getting vaccinated at a much lower rate](#) than white Americans.

– *Jessica Guynn*

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