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Inside C2

# Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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## U.S. developing plan to require foreign visitors to be vaccinated -official

WASHINGTON, Aug 4 (Reuters) - The Biden administration is developing a plan to require nearly all foreign visitors to the United States to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 as part of eventually lifting travel restrictions that bar much of the world from entering the United States, a White House official told Reuters on Wednesday.

The White House is not ready to immediately lift travel restrictions because of the rising COVID-19 case load and highly transmissible COVID-19 Delta variant, the official said.

The Biden administration has interagency working groups working "in order to have a new system ready for when we can reopen travel," the official said, adding it includes "a phased approach that over time will mean, with limited exceptions, that foreign nationals traveling to the United States (from all countries) need to be fully vaccinated."

Last month, Reuters reported that the White House was considering requiring foreign visitors to be vaccinated as part of discussions on how to relax travel restrictions.

The official added the "working groups are developing a policy and planning process to be prepared for when the time is right to transition to this new system."

Some other countries, including Canada and the United Kingdom, are relaxing or lifting restrictions for vaccinated Americans to travel.

The White House has held discussions with airlines and others about how it would implement a policy of requiring vaccines for foreign visitors. There are other questions the Biden administration must answer, including what proof it would accept of vaccination and if the United States would accept vaccines that some countries are using but which have not yet been authorized by U.S. regulators.

The United States currently bars most non-U.S. citizens who within the last 14 days have been in the United Kingdom, the 26 Schengen nations in Europe without border controls, Ireland, China, India, South Africa, Iran and Brazil.

The extraordinary U.S. travel restrictions were first imposed on China in January 2020 to address the spread of COVID-19 and other countries have been added since then — most recently India in early May.

Last week, Reuters reported the White House was discussing the potential of mandating COVID-19 vaccines for international visitors. The sources said no decisions have been made.

The Biden administration has also been talking to U.S. airlines in recent weeks about establishing international contact tracing for passengers before lifting travel restrictions.



## Pfizer to require U.S. workers receive COVID-19 vaccine or regular tests



A person walks past a Pfizer logo amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in the Manhattan borough of New York City, New York, U.S., April 1, 2021. REUTERS/Carlo Allegri  
NEW YORK, Aug 4 (Reuters) - Pfizer Inc (PFE.N), the U.S. drugmaker that developed a COVID-19 vaccine with German partner BioNTech, said on Wednesday it will require all its U.S. employees and contractors to become vaccinated

against COVID-19 or participate in weekly COVID-19 testing. Pfizer spokesperson Pamela Eisele said the company was taking the initiative in order to "to protect the health and safety of our colleagues and the communities we serve." Employees with medical conditions or religious objections can seek accommodations.

Outside of the United States, Pfizer will strongly encourage employees who are able to be vaccinated in their countries to do so, Eisele said. At the end of 2020, Pfizer had around 29,400 U.S.-based employees. As of Tuesday, 70.1% of U.S. adults had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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# WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

## CORONAVIRUS DIARY

08/04/2021



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## Is This The End Of Cuomo's Political Future?

The New York Attorney General's office issued a statement saying that, "We, the investigators appointed to conduct an investigation into allegations of sexual harassment by

Governor Andrew Cuomo conclude that the Governor engaged in conduct constituting sexual harassment under federal and New York state law."

This pronouncement



came after a months long investigation that concluded interviews with 179 people and the review of 74,000 documents. The report found Cuomo harassed 11 women including a state employee and a state trooper.

Cuomo said he was

totally innocent and stated that he never touched anyone inappropriately or made any inappropriate sexual advances. He also painted the investigation as a political endeavor by someone wanting to take over his job.

This is a big loss for the Democratic Party in many ways. New York state is the most important state in America. Cuomo was considered a rising star in politics, but now is facing the end of his career in the political world.



**Southern DAILY** Make Today Different

## Editor's Choice



A picture taken with a drone shows a general view of the site of the Aug. 4, 2020 explosion in Beirut's port, after almost a year since the blast, Lebanon. REUTERS/Imad Creidi



Belarusian Sprinter Krystina Tsimanouskaya who took refuge in the Polish embassy in Tokyo, looks on as she boards a flight to Vienna at Narita International Airport in Narita, east of Tokyo, Japan. REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon



Cristina Mamani walks near an unused boat in Lake Poopo, Bolivia's second largest lake which has dried up due to water diversion for regional irrigation needs and a warmer, drier climate, according to local residents and scientists, in Lake Poopo, Bolivia. REUTERS/Claudia Morales



Luz Rivas watches her pigs, as the government announced the slaughter of tens of thousands of pigs after detecting outbreaks of African swine fever in pig farms across the country, in Canongo, Dajabon, Dominican Republic. REUTERS/Ricardo Rojas



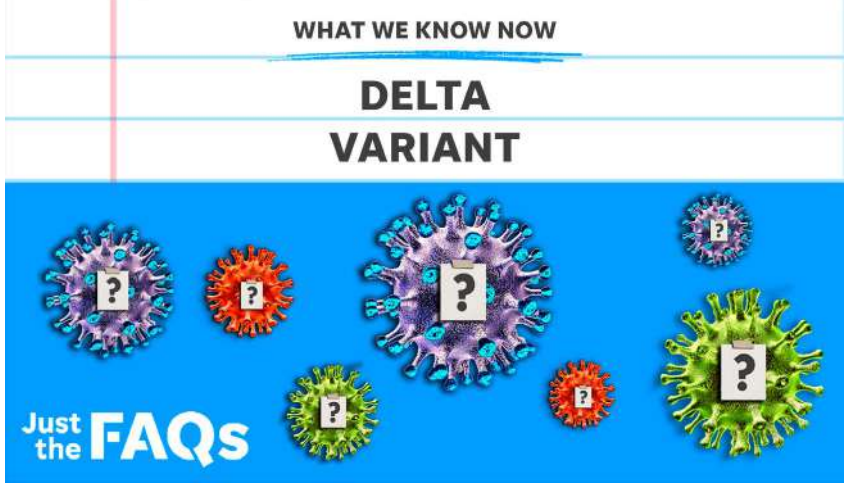
A medical worker in protective suit collects a swab from a child for nucleic acid testing following a new case of the coronavirus in Shanghai, China. cnsphoto via REUTERS



An Australian Defence Force member watches over a coronavirus vaccination clinic at the Bankstown Sports Club as the city experiences an extended lockdown, in Sydney, Australia. REUTERS/Loren Elliott



## CDC Internal Report: Delta Variant Is Now As Contagious As Chickenpox



**Key Point**  
The Delta variant -- originally known as B.1.617.2 is the possible variant of COVID-19 which was behind the ferocious second wave of coronavirus in India. The new variant is currently the dominant strain worldwide which is present in more than 100 countries.

**Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor**

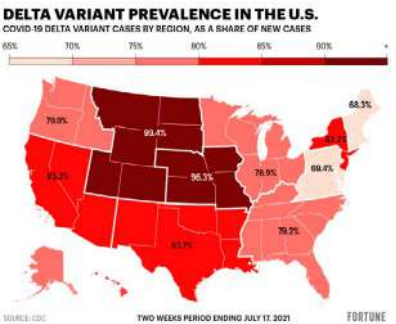
The Delta variant is much more contagious, more likely to break through protections afforded by the vaccines and may cause more severe disease than all other known versions of the virus, according to an internal presentation circulated within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the agency, acknowledged on Tuesday that vaccinated people with so-called breakthrough infections of the Delta variant carry just as much virus in the nose and throat as unvaccinated people, and may spread it just as readily, if less often.

But the internal document lays out a broader and even grimmer view of the variant. The Delta variant is more transmissible than the viruses that cause MERS, SARS, Ebola, the common cold, the seasonal flu and smallpox, and it is as contagious as chickenpox, according to the document, a copy of which was obtained by The New York Times.

The immediate next step for the agency is to “acknowledge the war has changed,” the document said. Its contents were first reported by The Washington Post on Thursday evening. The document’s tone reflects alarm among CDC scientists about Delta’s spread across the country, said a federal official who

has seen the research described in the document. The agency is expected to publish additional data on the variant on Friday. “The CDC is very concerned with the data coming in that Delta is a very serious threat that requires action now,” the official said.



There were 71,000 new cases per day on average in the United States, as of Thursday. The new data suggest that vaccinated people are spreading the virus and contributing to those numbers — although probably to a far lesser degree than the unvaccinated.

Dr. Walensky has called transmission by vaccinated people a rare event, but other

scientists have suggested it may be more common than once thought. The agency’s new masking guidelines for vaccinated people, introduced on Tuesday, were based on the information presented in the document. The CDC recommended that vaccinated people wear masks indoors in public settings in communities with high transmission of the virus. But the internal document hints that even that recommendation may not go far enough.

“Given higher transmissibility and current vaccine coverage, universal masking is essential,” the document said.

The agency’s data suggest that people with weak immune systems should wear masks even in places that do not have high transmission of the virus. So should vaccinated Americans who are in contact with young children, older adults, or otherwise vulnerable people. There are roughly 35,000 symptomatic infections per week among 162 million vaccinated Americans, according to data collected by the CDC as of July 24 that was cited in the internal presentation. But the agency does not track all mild or asymptomatic infections, so the actual incidence may be higher.



Infection with the Delta variant produces virus amounts in the airways that are tenfold higher than what is seen in people infected with the Alpha variant, which is also highly contagious, the document noted. The amount of virus in a person infected with Delta is a thousandfold more than what is seen in people infected with the original version of the virus, according to one recent study.

The CDC document relies on data from multiple studies, including an analysis of a recent outbreak in Provincetown, Mass., which began after the town’s Fourth of July festivities. By Thursday, that cluster had grown to 882 cases. About 74 percent were vaccinated, local health officials have said. Detailed analysis of the spread of cases showed that people infected with Delta car-

ry enormous amounts of virus in their nose and throat, regardless of vaccination status, according to the CDC document.

“This is one of the most impressive examples of citizen science I have seen,” said Dr. Celine Gounder, an infectious disease specialist at Bellevue Hospital Center in New York. “The people involved in the Provincetown outbreak were meticulous in making lists of their contacts and exposures.”

Infection with the Delta variant may be more likely to lead to severe illness, the document noted. Studies from Canada and Scotland found that people infected with the variant are more likely to be hospitalized, while research in Singapore indicated that they are more likely to require oxygen.



Still, the CDC’s figures show that the vaccines are highly effective in preventing serious illness, hospitalization and death in vaccinated people, experts said.

“Overall, Delta is the troubling variant we already knew it was,” said John Moore, a virologist at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York. “But the sky isn’t falling and vaccination still protects strongly against the worse outcomes.” (Courtesy <https://dnyuz.com/>)

### Related Delta COVID-19 Variant Can Spread Like Chickenpox And Cause More Severe Infections, Experts Warn

As the Delta COVID-19 variant strengthens its grip worldwide, experts have warned that the virus variant can spread like chickenpox and has the ability to cause severe health complications. “The Delta variant of the coronavirus may cause more severe illness than all other known versions of the virus and spread as easily as chickenpox,” the US health authority said.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has also stated that first identified in India, Delta COVID-19 variant is highly transmissible and can evade the immunity of the fully vaccinated people at the same rate as unvaccinated people. In its latest study, the CDC has stated that vaccinated people who got infected with Covid-19 or the so-called breakthrough infections carry about the same amount of the coronavirus as those who are unvaccinated.

**DELTA COVID-19 VARIANT TEN TIMES MORE INFECTIOUS**

The Delta variant -- originally known as B.1.617.2 is the possible variant of COVID-19 which was behind the ferocious second wave of coronavirus in India. The new variant is currently the dominant strain worldwide which is present in more than 100 countries.

**WHY IS THE DELTA VARIANT MORE TRANSMISSIBLE?**

According to the researchers, infection with the Delta variant produces virus amounts in the airways that are tenfold higher than what is seen in people infected with the Alpha variant, which is also highly contagious. Following a sudden surge in the number of cases infected with the delta COVID-19 variant, the CDC has recommended indoor masks for everyone (even those who are fully vaccinated). The agency cited the risk of the spread of the highly contagious delta variant, even among vaccinated people.



### SHOULD YOU STILL TAKE THE VACCINE SHOTS?

Yes, even though the studies have claimed that the delta COVID-19 variant can possibly evade immunity even for a fully vaccinated individual, experts are stating that taking vaccines can reduce the severity of the virus infection. “Vaccines prevent more than 90 per cent of severe disease, but may be less effective at preventing infection or transmission,” it reads. “Therefore, more breakthrough and more community spread despite vaccination,” a document by the CDC stated. (Courtesy <https://www.thehealthsite.com/>)

## But Use Is Still Significantly Up Among Medicare Patients, Per HHS Pandemic Spike in Telehealth Levels Off



Telehealth’s early bonanza during the pandemic has given way to persistently elevated use in primary care, a Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) report showed.

**Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor**

Analysis of Medicare fee-for-service (FFS) data showed an increase in Medicare primary care visits from 0.1% of all primary care in February to 43.5% in April, representing an increase from about 2,000 to 1.28 million telehealth visits per week.

Meanwhile, there was a “precipitous” drop in in-person visits for primary care in mid-March as COVID-19 took hold in the U.S., then a rise from mid-April through May, according to the report from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Use of telehealth in primary care “declined somewhat but appears to have leveled off at a persistent and significant level by the beginning of June,” the report noted. It still accounted for 22.7% of Medicare beneficiaries’ primary care visits as of June 3rd.

Overall, weekly primary care visit rates have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

“Based on early experience with Medicare primary care telehealth at the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency, there is evidence that Medicare’s new telehealth flexibilities played a critical role in helping to maintain access to primary health care services -- when many beneficiaries and providers were concerned with trans-

mission of COVID-19,” the authors noted.



“The stable and sustained use of telehealth after in-person primary care visits started to resume in mid-April suggests there may be continued demand for telehealth in Medicare, even after the pandemic ends.”

The findings overall match those from healthcare provider databases suggesting a 60% to 70% drop in health care office visits, partially offset by telehealth visits, with the start of the pandemic. Drug market research firm IQVIA has reported from physician surveys that about 9% of patient interactions were via telehealth prior to the pandemic but 51% during the shutdown, with expectation of a 21% rate after the pandemic, the HHS report noted. There have been calls for Medicare to make the loosened rules around telemedicine permanent, and some legislative movement in that direction, but private insurers have signaled the opposite.

Fred Pelzman, MD, an internal medicine physician at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City (and MedPage Today columnist),

said an informal survey of his patients indicated they would be willing to do up to 50% of their care via video tools.

“We went from a handful of video visits in our practice to several thousand over the course of the months,” he said. “It’s a great way to take care of people, kept a lot of people safe, we think. What has happened is that as we started to open our practice back up again and offer appointments, the floodgates have opened and patients are declining video visits.”



Those patients opting for in-person visits tend to be older, braving what feels like a quiet time in the pandemic for the state to take care of necessary visits, he noted. “I think ultimately that we’ll plateau. It will probably come down a little more.”

The study included Medicare FFS Part B claims from January through May 2020 for primary care services along with preliminary Medicare Part B primary care claims data up to June 3. Primary care services included evaluation and management, preventive services, and advance care planning.

Telehealth usage increased most in urban counties early in the pandemic and saw smaller declines in May compared with rural counties across the country. Among cities, Boston had the greatest proportion of primary care visits by telehealth (73.1%) and Phoenix the lowest (37%).

Notably, the rate “was not strongly associated with differences in COVID-19 severity across cities as measured by rate of hospitalizations per thousand Medicare FFS beneficiaries,” the report pointed out. (Courtesy <https://www.medpagetoday.com/>)

### Related Telehealth up 53%, growing faster than any other place of care

A striking indicator of telehealth’s building momentum suggests that now is the time for physicians to understand how care delivered at a distance can fit it into a wide variety of

practices.



A national study of insurance claims filed for alternative settings of care found telehealth rocketed up 53% from 2016 to 2017. That growth greatly outpaced other places studied—14% at urgent care centers, 7% at retail clinics, and 6% at ambulatory surgical centers (ASCs). In a telling sign of the shift in the delivery of care, emergency departments were the one setting reported on that experienced a decline—it was 2%. The data—drawn from claim lines, the separate procedures listed within a claim—and analysis comes from a white paper, “FH Healthcare Indicators and FH Medical Price Index 2019: An Annual View of Place of Service Trends and Medical Pricing.” The paper was issued by Fair Health, a New York nonprofit that operates a vast database of commercial and Medicare claims.



Telehealth is rapidly growing in terms of claims, and advancing its signature combination of health information and telecommunications. It can encompass consultations such as video-conferencing with patients and fellow physicians—though generally not simply phone calls, emails or texts—as well the collection of health data and images that can be shared in real time or stored and transmitted.

### Related Coverage Which Medical Specialties Use Telemedicine The Most?

The No. 1 diagnostic category for telehealth was mental health in 2016, but that dropped to No. 5 in this most recent Fair Health report, accounting for 7% of the claim lines in 2017 compared with 31% in 2016. Other categories of telehealth grew in 2017, with 13% of telehealth diagnoses being related to injuries

or digestive system issues.

Increasingly, the focus is on mobile devices—referred to as mHealth—allowing for ease and continuity of tracking patient data, and to facilitate communication with the health care team as well as researchers. For example, blood-pressure data can be collected at home, sent to a patient’s mobile phone and then be transmitted through an app.

Even with all those developments, telehealth is still a tiny share of care provided. It accounts for 0.11% of the Fair Health claims lines data for 2017. That compares with 2.6% at emergency departments, 1.2% at urgent care centers, 0.91% at ASCs and 0.033% percent at retail clinics.

### Payment catches up with telehealth

The AMA advocated for—and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has accepted—five new Current Procedural Terminology (CPT®) codes for 2019 that will allow physicians to be paid for their delivery of health care services using virtual technologies including remote patient monitoring (RPM) and e-consults. These include three CPT codes for RPM and two for e-consults with another health care professional.

In the Fair Health white paper, telehealth claims were identified by CPT codes such as CPT 99441—telephone evaluation and management service provided by a physician to an established patient—or telehealth modifiers such as GQ.

### Follow the AMA Playbook for digital success

The objective of the AMA’s 100-page Playbook is to provide “key steps, best practices and resources” for physicians who want to start and move forward in a quick and informed manner.



The authoritative guide discusses implementation, evaluating vendors and scaling up telehealth as a practice’s competencies and confidence grow. Also included are up-to-date CPT coding information, checklists and worksheets and other resources. (Courtesy <https://www.ama-assn.org/>)