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or contact
John Robbins 281-965-6390
Jun Gai 281-498-4310

Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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Publisher: Wea H. Lee
President: Catherine Lee
Editor: John Robbins

Address: 11122 Bellaire Blvd., Houston, TX 77072
E-mail: News@scdaily.com

Inside C2

Tuesday, November 23 2021

Austria locks down, Merkel says new steps needed as Europe faces COVID freeze

VIENNA/BERLIN, Nov 22 (Reuters) - Austria became on Monday the first country in western Europe to reimpose lockdown since vaccines were rolled out, shutting non-essential shops, bars and cafes as surging caseloads raised the spectre of a second straight winter in deep freeze for the continent.

Germany will also need tighter restrictions to control a record-setting wave of infections, outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel was quoted as saying, remarks that erased gains on European stock markets and sent bond yields down. read more

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With Europe once again the epicentre of the global pandemic that first prompted lockdowns in March 2020, new restrictions and vaccine mandates are expected to spread nearly two years after the first COVID-19 case was identified in China.

"We are in a highly dramatic situation. What is in place now is not sufficient," Merkel told leaders of her conservative CDU party in a meeting, according to two participants, confirming comments first reported by Bloomberg.

German Health Minister Jens Spahn, urgently calling on people to get vaccinated, said he was certain that by the end of the winter everyone in Germany would be "vaccinated, recovered or dead".

Austria told people to work from home if they can, and shut cafes, restaurants, bars, theatres and non-essential shops for 10 days. People may leave home for a limited number of reasons, such as going to workplaces, buying essentials or taking a walk.

The Austrian government has also announced it will make it compulsory to get inoculated as of Feb. 1. Many Austrians are sceptical about vaccinations, a view encouraged by the far-right Freedom Party, the third biggest in parliament.

"It's like a luxury prison. It's definitely limited freedom and for me it's not great psychologically," said Sascha Iamkovyi, a 43-year-old entrepreneur in the food sector, describing his return to lockdown on a chilly, overcast day in an unusually quiet Vienna.
"People were promised that if they got vaccinated they would be able to lead a normal life, but now that's not true."

Abandoned tables of a closed restaurant are seen in a street as the Austrian government imposed fourth national coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown in Vienna, Austria, November 22, 2021. REUTERS/ Lisi Niesner

S&P 500 hits record as banks rally on Powell nomination

Nov 22 (Reuters) - The S&P 500 hit a record high on Monday after President Joe Biden picked Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell to lead the central bank for a second term, with Wall Street lenders rallying on the prospect of interest rate hikes in 2022.

The Nasdaq (.IXIC) tumbled into negative territory after earlier hitting a record high, with rising Treasury yields weighing on Amazon (AMZN.O), Alphabet (GOOGL.O) and other major growth stocks.
Bucking losses in other Big Tech stocks, Apple (AAPL.O) jumped 2% and was on track to close at its highest level ever after JPMorgan flagged possible improvements to the supply of the iPhone 13 in coming months.

Powell's nomination was largely welcomed by investors hoping for no big changes in the Fed as it guides the economy through a recovery from the pandemic. The central bank is set to herald a return to pre-pandemic policy by end-2022. read more
Fed Governor Lael Brainard, who was the other top candidate for the job, will be vice chair, the White House said.

"Markets like predictability. ... While Brainard may have been a fine choice, the markets would not know what to expect from her even though the general consensus was that it meant lower rates for longer," said Randy Frederick, managing director of trading and derivatives, Charles Schwab, Austin, Texas.
The S&P 500 banks index (.SPXBK) jumped 2.9%, tracking a surge in Treasury yields as investors priced in policy tightening by the first half of 2022. Wells Fargo & Co (WFC.N) led gains among major Wall Street banks, adding 3.5%.

Futures contracts tied to the Fed's policy rate indicated that money markets are now expecting the U.S. central bank to raise interest rates by 25 basis points by next June versus a previous estimate of July.

"Financials being up today is pretty much an interest rate story, and tech being down is a rates story too," said Ross Mayfield, investment strategist at Baird.

In afternoon trading, the Dow Jones Industrial Average (.DJI) was up 0.61% at 35,818.62 points, while the S&P 500 (.SPX) gained 0.41% to 4,717.01. The S&P 500 earlier touched a record high 4,743.83.

The Nasdaq Composite (.IXIC) dropped 0.48% to 15,980.63.

The S&P 500 value index (.IVX) rallied 1.13%, while the S&P 500 growth index (.IGX) lost 0.25%.

Investors were awaiting a slew of economic data this week, including IHS business activity readings, personal consumption expenditure, and minutes of the Fed's latest meeting.

Amazon declined 2.3%, while Alphabet lost about 1.4%, both weighing heavily on the Nasdaq.

Tesla Inc (TSLA.O) gained 3.2% after CEO Elon Musk tweeted that the Model S Plaid will "probably" be coming to China around March. read more
Activision Blizzard (ATVI.O) slipped 0.9% after a media report that the video game publisher's chief executive, Bobby Kotick, would consider leaving if he could not quickly address concerns about company culture.

The return of se-

WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

CORONAVIRUS DIARY

11/22/2021

Wea H. Lee
Wealee@scdaily.com
Chairman of International District Houston Texas
Publisher Southern Daily Wea H. Lee
Southern News Group Chairman / CEO
Chairman of International Trade & Culture Center
Republic of Guiana Honorary consul at Houston Texas

50th Anniversary Of Ping Pong Diplomacy

Many leaders from the U.S. and China came together in Houston, Texas, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Ping Pong Diplomacy which reflects on peace and friendship through sports.

As the fourth largest city in America, we welcome the delegations and guests from over 90 countries to enjoy our city and Texan culture.

Ping Pong Diplomacy was born when the U. S. and China table tennis teams came together in 1971 and exchanged gifts and created positive dialogues and built friendships through the sport.

In Houston, the event promotion was led by the Chinese Civic Center and the Houston Sports Authority who co–sponsored a dinner to commemorate the historic occasion.

Today the U.S. and China are facing many challenges. In our relationship, we need to cooperate and work together for world peace.

Ping Pong Diplomacy is the spirit we all need to encompass: the bridge over the wall and peace over the wars.

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

Editor's Choice

A polar bear is pictured after sparring with another bear near the Hudson Bay community of Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. REUTERS/Carlos Osorio

A front end loader transports members of the Canadian Forces amidst flooded waters as they help move chickens at a farm affected by floods in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada. Jonathan Hayward/ Pool

Israeli couple Mordi and Natali Oknin speak to the media following their release after being detained over espionage charges for allegedly taking photographs of President Tayyip Erdogan's residence during a trip to Istanbul, Turkey, at their home in Modiin, Israel November 18. REUTERS/Ammar Awad

Chairs are left abandoned after a car plowed through a holiday parade in Waukesha, Wisconsin. REUTERS/Cheney Orr

A grandmother prays for her child's success in the annual college entrance examinations, at a Buddhist temple in Seoul, South Korea, November 18. REUTERS/Kim Hong-Ji

Travis McMichael reacts to questions during his testimony at the trial of Greg McMichael, his son Travis McMichael and William "Roddie" Bryan in the Glynn County Courthouse, as the murder trial over the killing of Ahmaud Arbery continues, in Brunswick, Georgia, November 17. Stephen B. Morton/Pool via REUTERS

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

BUSINESS

COVID-19 In The U.S. Update

CDC Panel Endorses COVID-19 Vaccine Boosters For All Adults

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

A key outside advisory group to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has endorsed the use of COVID-19 booster shots for all adults, a one-size-fits-all approach designed to simplify eligibility. If CDC Director Rochelle Walensky signs off on the broader use, as expected, the extra shots will be available immediately to all adults, as long as they are six months past the final dose of a Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, or two months after a Johnson & Johnson dose.

The recommendation from the panel comes just hours after the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized both Pfizer and Moderna's booster shots for everyone over the age of 18.

Pfizer applied to the FDA earlier this month for an expansion of the emergency authorization for its booster shot to make it available to anyone 18 or older. Moderna announced just this week that it too had asked the FDA to allow its booster to be given to all adults.

Boosters for everyone has always been the Biden administration's goal, but until now federal health authorities have stopped short of such a policy, and instead recommended boosters for only specific populations — those over age 65, anyone at high risk because of work or where they live, or those with an underlying medical condition.

The primary COVID-19 vaccination continues to provide good protection against severe disease and death, even as effectiveness against milder infection has waned. But cases have been steadily rising across the country, and authorities have said they want to stave off another winter surge.

The current recommendations, while fairly broad, have caused confusion. While people over the age of 65 are most at risk from waning vaccine immunity, fewer than 40 percent of them have received a booster, according to CDC data.

"The current guidelines, though well-intentioned and thoughtful, generate an obstacle to uptake of boosters. In pursuit of precision, they create confusion," Nirav Shah, president of Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, told the panel.

The panel did not make a distinction in their recommendation between the two types of mRNA vaccines, despite the potential for increased risk of myocarditis — a type of heart inflammation — in young men after receiving Moderna's vaccine.

CDC officials told the panel it's too early to draw conclusions on the risk of myocarditis after the third dose of mRNA vaccines, because teens and younger adults haven't yet been boosted in large enough numbers.

Several other countries have discouraged use of the Moderna vaccine in people younger than 30 because of that risk.

Gottlieb Says He Expects The CDC Will Consider 'Fully Vaccinated' As Including Boosters

Former Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb

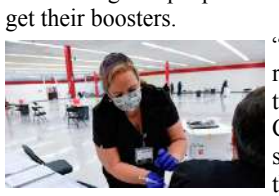
Former Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said on Sunday that he expects the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to consider Americans "fully vaccinated" when they receive a booster shot, adding that recommendations to change it would likely not happen this year.

"Should the CDC say you need a booster to be considered fully vaccinated?" "Face the Nation" moderator Margaret Brennan asked Gottlieb on CBS.

"I think at some point they're going to, but not this year," Gottlieb answered.

"I think eventually this will be considered the three-dose vaccine, but I would be hard pressed to believe CDC is going to make that recommendation any time soon, in part because of this debate about whether or not younger people who are less risk should be receiving that third dose in states where governors are looking to do this, and I think some local communities will do it," he added.

Gottlieb was also asked about CDC saying last week that all American adults could get a booster shot while specifically recommending that people over the age of 50 get their boosters.



"I think the reluctant nature by which CDC has been stepping into this debate reflects a broader ambivalence or a broader debate happening in a public health community about whether the vaccines should be used as tools to protect people from bad outcomes from COVID, or whether they should be used as tools to try to end the pandemic and control transmission," Gottlieb said.

CDC Director Rochelle Walensky late last week signed off on a recommendation from a CDC advisory panel to broaden eligibility of the COVID-19 booster to all American adults. The advisory panel had also recommended that those over the age of 50 should get their booster shot.

Fauci Hopes COVID-19 Booster Increases Durability To Not Need It Regularly

President Biden's chief medical adviser Anthony Fauci said on Sunday that he hopes COVID-19 boosters will increase vaccine durability so that "you will not necessarily need it" every six months or year.

"We would hope - and this is something that we're looking at very carefully - that that third shot with the mRNA not only boosts you way up but increases the durability so that you will not necessarily need it every six months or a year," Fauci said during "This Week" on ABC.

President Biden's chief medical adviser Anthony Fauci

"We're hoping it pushes it out more. If it doesn't, and the data show we do need it more often, then we'll do it," he added.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky signed off on a CDC advisory panel's recommendation to increase eligibility for booster shots to all American adults. The decision means that all adults who are at least six months out since receiving their second shot of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines are now able to get their third shot of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"Booster shots have demonstrated the ability to safely increase people's protection against infection and severe outcomes and are an important public health tool to strengthen our defenses against the virus as we enter the winter holidays. Based on the compelling evidence, all adults over 18 should now have equitable access to a COVID-19 booster dose," Walensky said in a statement regarding the news.

The decision comes only weeks after children as young as 5 years old became eligible to get COVID-19 vaccine, much to the relief of parents and health officials seeking to have their kids inoculated in time for holiday gatherings.

Despite widespread vaccine availability, however, it has not stopped the U.S. from passing the grim milestone last week of recording more COVID-19 deaths in 2021 than last year. (Courtesy thehill.com)

OSHA Suspends Enforcement Of COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate For Businesses

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is suspending enforcement of the Biden administration's COVID-19 vaccine mandate for large private businesses after a federal appeals court upheld a stay on it last week.

OSHA said in a statement published on its website Friday night that while it is confident in its power to protect workers amid the pandemic, it is suspending activities related to the mandate, citing the pending litigation.

"The court ordered that OSHA 'take no steps to implement or enforce' the ETS [Emergency Temporary Standard] 'until further court order.' While OSHA remains confident in its authority to protect workers in emergencies, OSHA has suspended activities related to the implementation and enforcement of the ETS pending future developments in the litigation," OSHA said.

President Biden announced in September that the administration was rolling out a new rule that would require all private employers with 100 or more employees to mandate vaccines or weekly testing for all personnel, a guideline that has the potential to impact nearly 80 million workers. Earlier this month the administration set Jan. 4 as the deadline for qualifying private employers to start mandating the vaccine or requiring weekly testing. The rule was developed by OSHA.

In a 22-page ruling last week, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals wrote that the administration's COVID-19 vaccine and testing mandate was "fatally flawed" and ordered that OSHA not enforce the requirement "pending adequate judicial review" of a motion for a permanent injunction.

The court said OSHA should "take no steps to implement or enforce the mandate until further court order." (Courtesy thehill.com)

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

A Daily Pill To Treat COVID-19 Could Be Just Months Away, Scientists Say

Results of trials on a daily pill to treat COVID-19 could be available within months.(Image/Unsplash/Halacious)

Key Point

- ***At least three antivirals for COVID are in clinical trials.***
- ***An early trial of 202 participants last Spring showed that molnupiravir rapidly reduced the levels of infectious virus.***
- ***Antivirals are already essential treatments for viral infections, including hepatitis C and HIV.***
- ***The drugs work by interfering with the virus's ability to replicate in human cells***

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

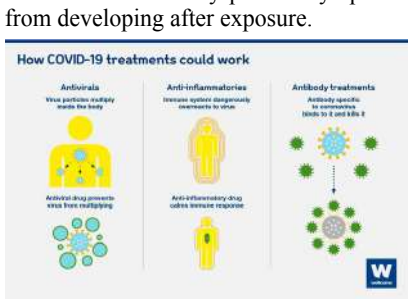
Within a day of testing positive for Covid-19 in June, Miranda Kelly was sick enough to be scared. At 44, with diabetes and high blood pressure, Kelly, a certified nursing assistant, was having trouble breathing, symptoms serious enough to send her to the emergency room. When her husband, Joe, 46, fell ill with the virus, too, she really got worried, especially about their five teenagers at home: "I thought, 'I hope to God we don't wind up on ventilators. We have children. Who's going to raise these kids?"

But the Kellys, who live in Seattle, had agreed just after their diagnoses to join a clinical trial at the nearby Fred Hutch cancer research center that's part of an international effort to test an antiviral treatment on the unvaccinated that could halt Covid early in its course.

By the next day, the couple were taking four pills, twice a day. Though they weren't told whether they had received an active medication or placebo, within a week, they said, their symptoms were better. Within two weeks, they had recovered.

"I don't know if we got the treatment, but I kind of feel like we did," Miranda Kelly said. "To have all these underlying conditions, I felt like the recovery was very quick."

The Kellys have a role in developing what could be the world's next chance to thwart Covid: a short-term regimen of daily pills that can fight the virus early after diagnosis and conceivably prevent symptoms from developing after exposure.



"Oral antivirals have the potential to not only curtail the duration of one's Covid-19 syndrome, but also have the potential to limit transmission to people in your household if you are sick," said Timothy Sheahan, a virologist at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill who has helped pioneer these therapies.

Antivirals are already essential treatments for other viral infections, including hepatitis C and HIV. One of the best known is Tamiflu, the widely prescribed pill that can shorten the duration of influenza and reduce the risk of hospitalization if given quickly. The medications, developed to treat and prevent viral infections in people and animals, work differently depending on the type. But they can be engineered to boost the immune system to fight infection, block receptors so viruses can't enter healthy cells, or lower the amount of active virus in the body.

At least three promising antivirals for Covid are being tested in clinical trials, with results expected as soon as late fall or winter, said Carl Dieffenbach, director of the Division of AIDS at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who is overseeing antiviral development.

"I think that we will have answers as to what these pills are capable of within the next several months," Dieffenbach said.

The top contender is a medication from Merck and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics called molnupiravir, Dieffenbach said. This is the product being tested in the Kellys' Seattle trial. Two others include a candidate from Pfizer, known as PF-07321332, and AT-527, an antiviral produced by Roche and Atea Pharmaceuticals.

They work by interfering with the virus's ability to replicate in human cells. In the case of molnupiravir, the enzyme that copies the viral genetic material is forced to make so many mistakes that the virus can't reproduce. That, in turn, reduces the patient's viral load, shortening infection time and preventing the kind of dangerous immune response that can cause serious illness or death. So far, only one antiviral drug, remdesivir, has been approved to treat Covid. But it is given intravenously to patients ill enough to be hospitalized, and is not intended for early, widespread use. By contrast, the top contenders under study can be packaged as pills.

Sheahan, who also performed preclinical work on remdesivir, led an early study in mice that showed that molnupiravir could prevent early disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid. The formula was discovered at Emory University and later acquired by Ridgeback and Merck.

Clinical trials have followed, including an early trial of 202 participants last spring that showed that molnupiravir rapidly reduced the levels of infectious virus. Merck chief executive Robert Davis said this month that the company expects data from its larger phase 3 trials in the coming weeks, with the potential to seek emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration "before year-end."

Pfizer launched a combined phase 2 and 3 trial of its product Sept. 1, and Atea officials said they expect results from phase 2 and phase 3 trials later this year.

If the results are positive and emergency use is granted for any product, Dieffenbach said, "distribution could begin quickly."

That would mean millions of Americans soon could have access to a daily orally administered medication, ideally a single pill, that could be taken for five to 10 days at the first confirmation of Covid infection.

"When we get there, that's the idea," said Dr. Daniel Griffin, an infectious diseases and immunology expert at Columbia University. "To have this all around the country, so that people get it the same day they get diagnosed."

Once sidelined for lack of interest, oral antivirals to treat coronavirus infections are now a subject of fierce competition and funding. In June, the Biden administration announced it had agreed to obtain about 1.7 million treatment courses of Merck's molnupiravir, at a cost of $1.2 billion, if the product receives emergency authorization or full approval. The same month, the administration said it would invest $3.2 billion in the Antiviral Program for Pandemics, which aims to develop antivirals for the Covid crisis and beyond, Dieffenbach said.

The pandemic kick-started a long-neglected effort to develop potent antiviral treatments for coronaviruses, said Sheahan. Though the original SARS virus in 2003 gave scientists a scare—followed by Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS, in 2012—research efforts slowed when those outbreaks did not persist.

"The commercial drive to develop any products just went down the tubes," said Sheahan.

Widely available antiviral drugs would join the monoclonal antibody therapies already used to treat and prevent serious illness and hospitalizations caused by Covid. The lab-produced monoclonal antibodies, which mimic the body's natural response to infection, were easier to develop but must be given primarily through intravenous infusions. The federal government is covering the cost of most monoclonal products at $2,000 a dose. It's still too early to know how the price of antivirals might compare.

Like the monoclonal antibodies, antiviral pills would be no substitute for vaccination, said Griffin. They would be another tool to fight Covid. "It's nice to have another option," he said.

One challenge in developing antiviral drugs quickly has been recruiting enough participants for the clinical trials, each of which needs to enroll many hundreds of people, said Dr. Elizabeth Duke, a Fred Hutch research associate overseeing its molnupiravir trial. Participants must be unvaccinated and enrolled in the trial within five days of a positive Covid test. Any given day, interns make 100 calls to newly Covid-positive people in the Seattle area—and most say no.

"Just generally speaking, there's a lot of mistrust about the scientific process," Duke said. "And some of the people are saying kind of nasty things to the interns."

If the antiviral pills prove effective, the next challenge will be ramping up a distribution system that can rush them to people as soon as they test positive. Griffin said it will take something akin to the program set up last year by UnitedHealthcare, which sped Tamiflu kits to 200,000 at-risk patients enrolled in the insurer's Medicare Advantage plans. Merck officials predicted the company could produce more than 10 million courses of therapy by the end of the year. Atea and Pfizer have not released similar estimates.

Even more promising? Studies evaluating whether antivirals can prevent infection after exposure.

"Think about that," said Duke, who is also overseeing a prophylactic trial. "You could give it to everyone in a household, or everyone in a school. Then we're talking about a return to, maybe, normal life." (Courtesy weforum.org)