

# States see rise in wasted doses as demand for vaccines slows

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by Stephen Loiaconi

Thursday, June 3rd 2021

WASHINGTON (SBG) — As public health officials across the United States scramble to counter a drop in demand for [COVID-19 vaccines](#), another concern is quickly emerging: hundreds of thousands of doses already distributed to states could soon expire if they are not used.

In Arkansas, [officials said Wednesday](#) they have almost 60,000 unused doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine scheduled to expire by the end of June, as well as surpluses of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines that need to be used by August. The state has only thrown out 5,000 vaccine doses so far, and officials are setting up new pop-up clinics and offering financial incentives to use up what they have before it is too late.

Retired Arkansas National Guard Col. Rob Ator, who has been overseeing the state's vaccine distribution, told KATV the vaccines are federal property, which limits his ability to redirect or reallocate them, and there is no clear mechanism for returning doses to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Officials in other states are encountering similar challenges.

"It's an all-hands-on-deck kind of a theory to get the vaccine out, but there is the potential in the future that we could have large-scale wastage," Ator said.

About 10 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine that have been distributed to states and pharmacies remain unused. The federal government also has tens of millions of doses of other vaccines that have not yet been distributed, including a large supply of the AstraZeneca shot that has not been approved for use in the U.S.

[Politico reported Wednesday](#) the Biden administration is considering collecting surplus doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and sending them abroad before they expire. That plan faces some logistical obstacles, such as ensuring that the receiving countries have systems in place to distribute and administer the shots quickly enough.

As of Thursday, 63% of U.S. adults had received at least one dose of a vaccine, but many Americans who have not yet been vaccinated do not want to get a shot for a variety of reasons. States have scaled back their orders of new doses from the federal government, and some have used [as little as 60%](#) of the doses they already received.

“We’re going to hear more and more of these stories because we’re sort of hitting a wall in terms of people who want to be vaccinated,” said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

A CDC memo distributed to states last month advised that waste may increase as the vaccine rollout continues, but the agency stressed providers should take every opportunity to vaccinate every eligible person, even if that means doses are thrown out at the end of the day. That guidance could allow more physicians to administer vaccines in their offices.

“We recognize that as we continue to create more opportunities to vaccinate more people, it may increase the likelihood of leaving unused doses in a vial,” the memo stated.

New coronavirus cases and deaths in the U.S. continue to decline, but officials say vaccination rates are [short of the levels believed necessary](#) to achieve herd immunity. There are still severe disparities in access to vaccines, particularly in Black and Hispanic communities, and wasted doses could exacerbate those inequities.

“Every dose that is lost is a missed opportunity to help prevent another person from acquiring SARS-CoV-2 and becoming seriously ill,” said Dr. David Holtgrave, dean of the University at Albany School of Public Health.

Data on wasted COVID-19 vaccine doses has been inconsistent and incomplete, with states and the federal government sometimes reporting conflicting numbers. CDC records obtained by CNN showed one of every 850 doses distributed through March 29 had to be thrown out because it was unused, spoiled, expired, or wasted.

Officials acknowledged that was likely an underestimate, and some figures released by states suggest higher percentages of doses have been wasted. Overall, the numbers appear to be relatively low, but they could soon rise.

[According to The Sacramento Bee](#), about 31,000 of the 39 million doses distributed to California had been wasted, as of May 10. In Texas, [the Houston Chronicle found](#) 60,000 doses had gone to waste through mid-May, but the number of unused doses climbed rapidly in recent weeks as demand slowed.

Michigan has [seen a similar trend](#), with the number of wasted doses doubling to 37,000 in the second half of May. Clinics in some counties reported being unable to find enough patients to use all the doses they prepared in a day, and other doses had been lost due to equipment malfunctions or accidents.

The data released by states generally do not include national pharmacy chains that have received supplies of vaccines directly from the federal government. The CDC reported last month that CVS and Walgreens accounted for more wasted vaccine doses than all state and federal agencies combined.

The pharmacy chains blamed the lost doses partly on problems with transportation and limitations on redirecting unused vaccines, and they stressed the waste was still a small fraction of the number of doses administered. Much of their waste appears to have occurred early in the vaccination drive when the federal government partnered with the pharmacies to administer shots in long-term care facilities.

As the nation [raced to inoculate up to 300 million people](#) in a matter of months with new vaccines that needed to be stored in precise conditions, some waste and spoilage was to be expected. Transportation and storage

remain issues, but some restrictions—such as how long thawed Pfizer vaccine vials can be kept at refrigerated temperatures—have been eased.

“Our hope, of course, is for there to be no waste,” said Dr. Christienne Alexander, a professor at Florida State University and a physician at FSU PrimaryHealth. “However, some waste in a vaccine rollout of this scale and proportion is inevitable. Like with any new process, we are constantly evaluating our procedures to improve as we go along.”

[The imminent expiration](#) of hundreds of thousands of doses, some of which have already been distributed to local clinics and health centers, presents a new complication. It also raises difficult ethical questions at a time when many other countries are desperate to obtain vials.

“The global vaccine status is not very good,” Adalja said. “It’s not a good scenario to see the U.S. throwing vaccine doses in the trash can while other countries struggle to get first doses into people.”

The federal government purchased more doses of the Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines in advance than it would need to inoculate the entire U.S. population. With supply now outstripping demand in many states, the question of what to do with the leftover doses has become increasingly urgent.

“There are many countries around the globe with less than 10% of the population receiving even one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine,” Holtgrave said. “So, while the needs for further vaccine uptake in the U.S. are acute, the need is even more extreme in many other nations.”

The White House launched a “month of action” Wednesday dedicated to meeting President Joe Biden’s goal of getting a first dose administered to at least 70% of U.S. adults by July 4. The administration announced several new initiatives and incentives to make vaccination easier and more appealing for those who have resisted.

Many vaccination sites, including some local pharmacies, will be open for 24 hours on Fridays in June. Several national daycare chains will offer free drop-in child care while parents get vaccinated, Uber and Lyft will continue to provide free rides, and small and medium employers will be eligible for tax credits if they give employees paid time off to get a shot.

Outreach campaigns are also accelerating, with Vice President Kamala Harris leading a national vaccination tour across the South and Midwest. The White House will partner with the Black Coalition Against COVID-19 to provide information and vaccination at hubs of activity in Black communities like barbershops and hairstylists.

“We need to start bringing the vaccine to the people instead of expecting people to come get the vaccine,” Alexander said.

As the administration steps up efforts to expend vaccine supplies in the U.S., it is also beginning to distribute unneeded doses to other countries. Some vials have already been sent to nearby allies like Mexico and Canada, but millions of doses will soon be shipped off to less developed countries overseas.

The Biden administration [released a framework for sharing vaccines](#) with the rest of the world Thursday, with plans to distribute at least 80 million doses by the end of June. Most doses will be donated through COVAX, but up to one-quarter will be provided directly to countries that need immediate assistance.

“As long as this pandemic is raging anywhere in the world, the American people will still be vulnerable. And the United States is committed to bringing the same urgency to international vaccination efforts that we have demonstrated at home,” President Biden said in a statement.

Although there are some legal and political impediments to consider, experts say repurposing surplus doses from states to send abroad before they expire could have a lasting impact on the global fight against COVID-19. Containing the virus on other continents would reduce the risk of new variants developing that could be resistant to existing vaccines.

"The more people that get vaccinated, the fewer bodies there are for the virus to mutate in, and the lower the rates of transmission," Alexander said. "This isn't just a United States problem, it's a global problem."