

King County Warns Variant Strain Could Stir Coronavirus 'Volcano'

"We need to expect the coronavirus equivalent of a Mount St. Helens-like eruption sometime in the next few months," Dr. Jeff Duchin said.



- [Lucas Combos, Patch Staff](#)
- Posted Fri, Jan 22, 2021 at 2:35 pm PT | Updated Fri, Jan 22, 2021 at 3:42 pm PT

Reply



King County's top health officials are urging a concerted community effort to keep transmission rates on the decline, especially as a more contagious strain could arrive at any time. (Shutterstock/Steve Estvanik)

SEATTLE — King County's health officer is urging a renewed community effort to tamp down coronavirus transmission to help limit the potentially devastating effects of variant strains spreading elsewhere, which appear to be more infectious.

Dr. Jeff Duchin hosted his weekly coronavirus briefing Friday afternoon, which included some good news on recent declines in case counts, hospitalizations and deaths in the state's most populous county. However, Duchin warned against complacency, as vaccine supply continues to be inadequate and concerns that the variant strain could be detected locally "any day now."

"We are used to living with real volcanoes in the Pacific Northwest, and right now we're also living in the shadow of a COVID-19 volcano," Duchin said. "We need to expect the coronavirus equivalent of a Mount St. Helens-like eruption sometime in the next few months. That's because a more transmissible strain can cause a viral eruption in infections, hospitalizations and deaths that can overwhelm our hospitals."

Despite the looming threat of a more infectious outbreak, Duchin said, it can be defeated using the same proven public health defenses that have been encouraged for months.

"This virus has been working out; it's gotten faster and more fit," Duchin said. "We need to fight smarter and harder to beat it, but we can and must beat it down."

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The more contagious variant, which first swept through the UK, has now been found in at least 20 states, and King County should expect it will eventually become widespread locally, Duchin said. But, unlike the early days of the pandemic when Washington was the first to experience an outbreak, this time, residents have an early warning and time to prepare.

"We should take a very fresh look at how we can do better at taking all possible precautions in our personal and social lives, and workplaces and wherever people gather," Duchin said. "This means decreasing nonessential activities outside the home, wearing a well-made — and that means two layers or more — snug-fitting mask whenever around people from outside your household. Improve ventilation indoors and in workplaces, avoid crowded indoor spaces and places with poor ventilation as much as possible. Socialize and do as much as possible outdoors, keep 6 feet of distance at a minimum, especially indoors, and wash hands frequently."

Some welcome news, Duchin said, is that King County's "COVID-19 rollercoaster" is back on a downward trajectory, with case counts falling since about Jan. 9 after an upswing in the wake of the holidays. However, activity remains high, with about 360 cases reported each day on average over the past week — a figure cut in half since early December. The rate of hospitalizations and deaths have also fallen, with about 120 COVID-19 patients admitted to King County hospitals in the last seven days, and an average of five deaths per day.

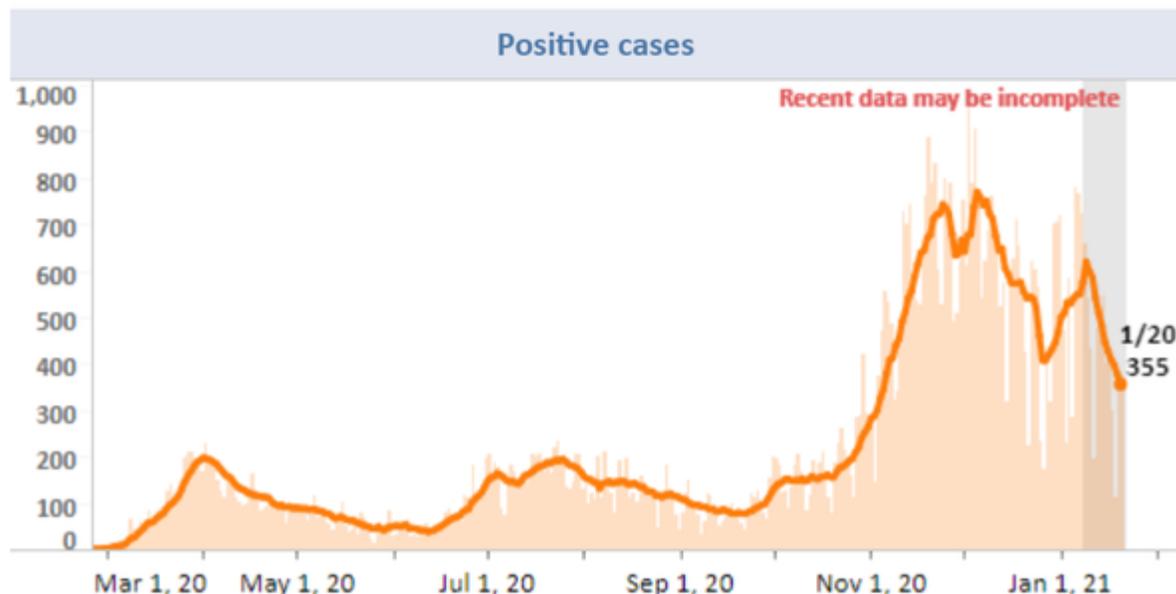
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Megan VerHelst, Patch Staff



(Public Health - Seattle & King County)

One decreasing trend that is unwelcome, Duchin said, is fewer people seeking testing since the holidays. Health officials continue to urge anyone with close contacts or any symptoms to immediately isolate, seek testing and avoid contact with others until they receive results.

King County has administered at least two-thirds of its vaccine allocation

While King County is outpacing the state in providing vaccines, a cloud of uncertainty remains over the future of vaccine supply. To date, the county has received 214,000 doses of the vaccine, roughly a quarter of the state's total. Of that, Duchin said, at least two-thirds have already been administered, with the strongest progress seen among health care workers.

So far, 80 percent of nurses, 81 percent of physician assistants and 74 percent of doctors have received at least one dose, along with 65 percent of EMTs and paramedics, 65 percent of dentists and 56 percent of pharmacists. One group that has lagged, licensed health care assistants and technicians, with about 37 percent having received their first dose.

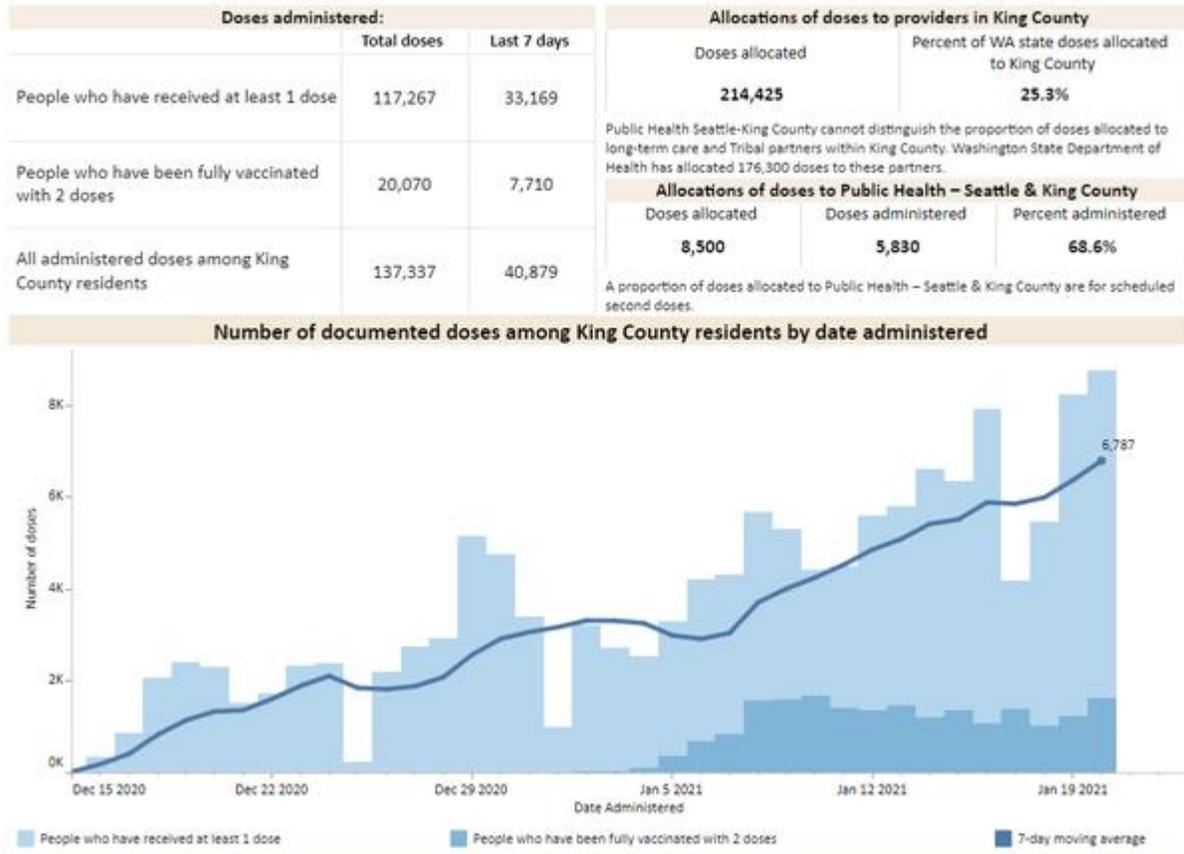
The county is working to stand up its first two mass vaccination sites in south King County, including at the ShoWare Center in Kent, and continues to deploy mobile vaccination teams to areas that have limited access to health care.

Duchin said the main roadblocks to expanding its multi-pronged effort continues to be the limited supply of vaccine, and sparse details about what to expect for shipments in the coming weeks and months.

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"We don't know week-to-week what to expect, and we cannot forecast future allocations," Duchin said. "For example, our weekly allocations have ranged between 12,000 and 73,000 doses."

Despite the challenges, Duchin said the average number of doses administered has steadily increased, rising 25 percent in the last week to reach 6,800 given per day. However, as the [first tier of phase 1B](#) expands eligibility to approximately 300,000 more residents, more significant federal shipments will be needed. Even if those materialize, there will still be a long road ahead.



(Public Health - Seattle & King County)

"We always knew that the COVID-19 program would take many months, and yesterday in a national briefing, Dr. Fauci estimated that under the most favorable conditions, the U.S. might be able to vaccinate all eligible adults by the end of summer," Duchin said. "So we all have to understand what's realistic based on the number of doses that the current manufacturers are able to supply."

Right now, officials say the best way to determine eligibility status and find an appointment is using the state's [online Phase Finder tool](#). Duchin said the county is also working to set up its own system, including a phone-based option, that is specifically tailored for King County residents.

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