Hawaii health officials say vaccine prevented serious illness for at least 3 people who contracted coronavirus

By Kristen Consillio March 12, 2021   March 13, 2021

None of the three individuals who received two doses of the vaccine and later tested positive became severely ill or transmitted the virus to others, the Department of Health said in an email.

"This number is not outside what we would expect with nearly 165,000 people in Hawaii who are fully vaccinated," said DOH spokesman Brooks Baehr. "A vaccine with 95% efficacy will protect 95 out of 100 people. This is another reason we must all do our part to keep case counts low. The lower the prevalence of COVID in the community, the lower the chance any of us — even those who have been vaccinated — will be infected."

One of the cases was an Oahu health care worker who contracted the virus after a recent trip to the mainland. The worker had completed the two-dose regimen for the COVID-19 vaccine in early January, and traveled to multiple mainland cities about a month later.

After returning to Hawaii, the individual and a travel companion were notified of their positive test results. Neither developed any symptoms or infected close contacts, the Health Department said, adding that laboratory specimens could not be obtained for sequencing to identify a variant of the virus.

Health officials have stressed that being vaccinated for COVID-19 does not guarantee that a person will not contract COVID-19. However, the vaccines are still preventing severe disease and saving lives, said Health Director Libby Char.

"Nothing is 100%. The really important thing is that being vaccinated prevents us from serious illness, hospitalization and death," she said. "It doesn't mean that you are completely immune and free from ever getting COVID. Some people won't develop enough antibodies."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the vaccines in the United States are "effective at preventing COVID-19 disease, especially severe illness and death." But CDC officials caution that "we're still learning how effective the vaccines are against variants of the virus that causes COVID-19."

Early data show the vaccines might work against some variants but could be less effective against others. "We're still learning how well COVID-19 vaccines keep people from spreading the disease."

Hawaii health officials reported one new coronavirus death — an Oahu man in his 60s with an underlying medical condition — and 66 infections, bringing the state's totals since the start of the pandemic to 449 fatalities and 28,145 cases.

The new cases include 30 on Oahu, 20 on Maui, 15 on Hawaii island and one on Molokai, according to health officials. As a result of updated information, state health officials removed two Oahu cases from the counts.

The statistics released today reflect the new infection cases reported to the department Wednesday.

The state is allowing residents 65 and older and those in the Phase 1c category to get immunized starting Monday. That includes essential workers in the hospitality industry, food service, transportation, water/wastewater, construction, banking and finance, communications, energy, legal, media, public safety and public health workers, as well as 16- to 64-year-olds with high-risk medical conditions. Hawaii received 62,530 vaccine doses this week and is expecting 64,670 doses to arrive next week.

The vaccines are just another layer of protection, and residents should still adhere to precautions until enough people are vaccinated and "we have good immunity within our community," Char added.

"We should think of it not as a panacea, but as another layer of protection. The most important layer of protection … wearing our masks, keeping our distance from each other — that's what's going to keep us safe," she said. "Even though we've been vaccinated, it doesn't mean you have a free ticket to go and do whatever you want."