Effectiveness of COVID-19 Vaccines in Preventing SARS-CoV-2 Infection Among Frontline Workers Before and During B.1.617.2 (Delta) Variant Predominance — Eight U.S. Locations, December 2020–August 2021

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On August 24, 2021, this report was posted as an MMWR Early Release on the MMWR website (https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr).

During December 14, 2020–April 10, 2021, data from the HEROES-RECOVER Cohorts,* a network of prospective cohorts among frontline workers, showed that the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna mRNA COVID-19 vaccines were approximately 90% effective in preventing symptomatic and asymptomatic infection with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, in real-world conditions (*1,2*). This report updates vaccine effectiveness (VE) estimates including all COVID-19 vaccines available through August 14, 2021, and examines whether VE differs for adults with increasing time since completion of all recommended vaccine doses. VE before and during SARS-CoV-2 B.1.617.2 (Delta) variant predominance, which coincided with an increase in reported COVID-19 vaccine breakthrough infections, were compared (*3,4*).

Methods for the HEROES-RECOVER Cohorts have been published previously (1,2,5). Health care personnel, first responders, and other essential and frontline workers in eight U.S. locations across six states were tested weekly for SARS-CoV-2 infection by reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR)[†] and upon the onset of any COVID-19-like illness. Weeks when the Delta variant accounted for \geq 50% of viruses sequenced, based on data from each respective location, were defined as weeks of Delta variant predominance. Vaccination was documented by self-report and verified by provision of vaccine cards or extraction from electronic medical records or state immunization registries. Among 4,217 participants, 3,483 (83%) were vaccinated; 2,278 (65%) received Pfizer-BioNTech, 1,138 (33%) Moderna, and 67 (2%) Janssen (Johnson & Johnson) COVID-19 vaccines. Cox proportional hazards models were used to calculate ratios of unvaccinated to fully vaccinated (≥ 14 days after receipt of all recommended COVID-19 vaccine doses) infection rates,

adjusted for occupation, site, and local viral circulation (6), and weighted for inverse probability of vaccination using sociodemographic characteristics, health information, frequency of close social contact, and mask use. This activity was reviewed by CDC and was conducted consistent with applicable federal law and CDC policy.[§]

During the 35-week study period, 4,136 participants with no previous laboratory-documented SARS-CoV-2 infection contributed a median of 20 unvaccinated days per participant (interquartile range [IQR] = 8–45 days; total = 181,357 days), during which 194 SARS-CoV-2 infections were identified; 89.7% of these infections were symptomatic. A total of 2,976 participants contributed a median of 177 fully vaccinated days (IQR = 115–195 days; total = 455,175 days) with 34 infections, 80.6% of which were symptomatic. Adjusted VE against SARS-CoV-2 infection was 80% (95% confidence interval [CI] = 69%–88%). The VE point estimate was 85% among participants for whom <120 days had elapsed since completion of full vaccination compared with 73% among those for whom \geq 150 days had elapsed; however the VE 95% CI were overlapping, indicating the difference was not statistically significant (Table).

During Delta variant-predominant weeks at study sites, 488 unvaccinated participants contributed a median of 43 days (IQR = 37-69 days; total = 24,871 days) with 19 SARS-CoV-2 infections (94.7% symptomatic); 2,352 fully vaccinated participants contributed a median of 49 days (IQR = 35-56 days; total = 119,218 days) with 24 SARS-CoV-2 infections (75.0% symptomatic). Adjusted VE during this Delta predominant period was 66%(95% CI = 26%-84%) compared with 91% (95% CI = 81%-96%) during the months preceding Delta predominance.

During December 14, 2020–August 14, 2021, full vaccination with COVID-19 vaccines was 80% effective in preventing RT-PCR–confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection among frontline workers, further affirming the highly protective benefit of full vaccination up to and through the most recent summer U.S. COVID-19 pandemic waves. The VE point estimates declined from 91% before predominance of the SARS-CoV-2 Delta

^{*}Arizona Healthcare, Emergency Response and Other Essential Workers Surveillance Study (HEROES) conducted in Phoenix, Tucson, and other noncentrally located areas in Arizona; Research on the Epidemiology of SARS-CoV-2 in Essential Response Personnel (RECOVER) conducted in Miami, Florida; Duluth, Minnesota; Portland, Oregon; Temple, Texas; and Salt Lake City, Utah.

[†] RT-PCR was conducted using the Quidel Lyra SARS-CoV-2 Assay (before November 2020) or TaqPath COVID-19 Combo Kit (Applied Biosystems) at the Marshfield Clinic Research Institute (Marshfield, WI).

[§] 45 C.F.R. part 46.102(l)(2), 21 C.F.R. part 56; 42 U.S.C. Sect 241(d); 5 U.S.C. Sect 552a; 44 U.S.C. Sect 3501 et seq.

| Period and vaccination status | No. of contributing participants* | Total no. of person-days | Median days (IQR) | No. of SARS-CoV-2 infections | Adjusted VE, [†] % (95% CI) |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Full cohort to date | | | | | |
| Unvaccinated | 4,136 | 181,357 | 20 (8–45) | 194 | N/A |
| Fully vaccinated [§] | 2,976 | 454,832 | 177 (115–195) | 34 | 80 (69–88) |
| 14–119 days after full vaccination | 2,923 | 284,617 | 106 (106–106) | 13 | 85 (68–93) |
| 120–149 days after full vaccination | 2,369 | 66,006 | 30 (30–30) | 3 | 81 (34–95) |
| ≥150 days after full vaccination | 2,129 | 104,174 | 52 (37–64) | 18 | 73 (49–86) |
| Pre-Delta variant predominance | | | | | |
| Unvaccinated | 4,137 | 156,626 | 19 (8–43) | 175 | N/A |
| Fully vaccinated | 2,875 | 329,865 | 124 (95–149) | 10 | 91 (81–96) |
| Delta variant predominance | | | | | |
| Unvaccinated | 488 | 24,871 | 43 (37–69) | 19 | N/A |
| Fully vaccinated | 2,352 | 119,218 | 49 (35–56) | 24 | 66 (26-84) |

TABLE. Effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines against any SARS-CoV-2 infection among frontline workers, by B.1.617.2 (Delta) variant predominance and time since full vaccination — eight U.S. locations, December 2020–August 2021

Abbreviations: CI = confidence interval; IQR = interquartile range; N/A = not applicable; SMD = standardized mean difference; VE = vaccine effectiveness.

* Person-days between the date of any dose of COVID-19 vaccine and fully vaccinated status were excluded from VE models because of indeterminate immune status. Participants with SARS-CoV-2 infection during this period were also excluded; in the pre-Delta period, 47 participants were excluded, and in the Delta period, two participants were excluded. Contributing participants in vaccination categories also do not equal the total number of participants in the cohort.

⁺ Adjusted VE was inversely weighted for probability of being vaccinated and adjusted for local virus circulation, study location, and occupation. Delta variant models were additionally adjusted for ethnicity. All Cox regression models met the proportional hazards assumption. To calculate the probability of being vaccinated for each period, boosted regression models were fit including covariates for site, sociodemographic characteristics, health information, frequency of close social contact, mask use, and local virus circulation. In the full cohort to date and the pre-Delta cohort, all covariates met balance criteria of SMD<0.2 after weighting except mask use at work (SMD = 0.227 and 0.207, respectively) but was not found to change VE estimates by ≥3% when added to the models. In the Delta predominant cohort occupation, ethnicity, influenza vaccination, and mask use at work did not meet balance criteria (SMD range = 0.206–0.288); influenza vaccination and mask use at work did change VE by ≥3% and were therefore included as covariates in the Cox regression model for VE.</p>

[§] Fully vaccinated was defined as ≥14 days after receipt of all recommended COVID-19 vaccine doses.

variant to 66% since the SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant became predominant at the HEROES-RECOVER cohort study sites; however, this trend should be interpreted with caution because VE might also be declining as time since vaccination increases and because of poor precision in estimates due to limited number of weeks of observation and few infections among participants. As with all observational VE studies, unmeasured and residual confounding might be present. Active surveillance through the cohort is ongoing and VE estimates will be monitored continuously. Although these interim findings suggest a moderate reduction in the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines in preventing infection, the sustained two thirds reduction in infection risk underscores the continued importance and benefits of COVID-19 vaccination.

Acknowledgments

Mark G. Thompson, Lauren Grant, Julie Mayo Lamberte, Young M. Yoo, Gregory Joseph, Josephine Mak, Monica Dickerson, Suxiang Tong, John Barnes, Eduardo Azziz-Baumgartner, Melissa L. Arvay, Preeta Kutty, Alicia M. Fry, Lenee Blanton, Jill Ferdinands, Anthony Fiore, Aron Hall, Adam MacNeil, L. Clifford McDonald, Mary Reynolds, Sue Reynolds, Stephanie Schrag, Nong Shang, Robert Slaughter, Matthew J. Stuckey, Natalie Thornburg, Jennifer Verani, Vic Veguilla, Rose Wang, Bao-Ping Zhu, William Brannen, Stephanie Bialek, CDC; Jefferey L. Burgess, Karen Lutrick, Shawn Beitel, Patrick Rivers, Xiaoxiao Sun, Joe K. Gerald, Janko Nikolich-Žugich, Genesis Barron, Dimaye Calvo, Esteban Cardona, Andrea Carmona, Alissa Coleman, Zoe Baccam, Emily Cooksey, Kiara Earley, Natalie Giroux, Sofia Grijalva, Allan Guidos, Adrianna Hernandez, James Hollister, Theresa Hopkins, Rezwana Islam, Krystal Jovel, Olivia Kavanagh, Jonathan Leyva, Sally Littau, Amelia Lobos, James Lopez, Veronica Lugo, Jeremy Makar, Taylor Maldonado, Enrique Marquez, Allyson Munoz, Assumpta Nsengiyunva, Joel Parker, Jonathan Perez Leyva, Alexa Roy, Saskia Smidt, Isabella Terrazas, Tahlia Thompson, Heena Timsina, Erica Vanover, Mandie White, April Yingst, Kenneth Komatsu, Elizabeth Kim, Karla Ledezma, University of Arizona, Arizona Department of Health Services; David Engelthaler, Translational Genomics Research Institute; Lauren E.W. Olsho, Danielle R. Hunt, Laura J. Edwards, Meredith G. Wesley, Meghan K. Herring, Tyler C. Morrill, Brandon P. Poe, Brian Sokol, Andrea Bronaugh, Tana Brummer, Hala Deeb, Rebecca Devlin, Sauma Doka, Tara Earl, Jini Etolue, Deanna Fleary, Jessica Flores, Chris Flygare, Isaiah Gerber, Louise Hadden, Jenna Harder, Lindsay LeClair, Nancy McGarry, Peenaz Mistry, Steve Pickett, Khaila Prather, David Pulaski, Rajbansi Raorane, Meghan Shea, John Thacker, Matthew Trombley, Pearl Zheng, Chao Zhou, Abt Associates; Kayan Dunnigan, Spencer Rose, Tnelda Zunie, Michael E. Smith, Kempapura Murthy, Nicole Calhoun, Claire Mathenge, Arundhati Rao, Manohar Mutnal, Linden Morales, Shelby Johnson, Alejandro Arroliga, Madhava Beeram, Joel Blais, Jason Ettlinger, Angela Kennedy, Natalie Settele, Rupande Patel, Elisa Priest, Jennifer Thomas, Baylor Scott & White Health; Allison L. Naleway, Holly C. Groom, Jennifer L. Kuntz, Yolanda Prado, Daniel Sapp, Mi Lee, Chris Eddy,

Matt Hornbrook, Danielle Millay, Dorothy Kurdyla, Ambrosia Bass, Kristi Bays, Kimberly Berame, Cathleen Bourdoin, Carlea Buslach, Jennifer Gluth, Kenni Graham, Tarika Holness Enedina Luis, Abreeanah Magdaleno, DeShaun Martin, Joyce Smith-McGee, Martha Perley, Sam Peterson, Aaron Piepert, Krystil Phillips, Joanna Price, Sperry Robinson, Katrina Schell, Emily Schield, Natosha Shirley, Anna Shivinsky, Britta Torgrimson-Ojerio, Brooke Wainwright, Shawn Westaway, Kaiser Permanente Northwest; Jennifer Meece, Elisha Stefanski, Lynn Ivacic, Jake Andreae, Adam Bissonnette, Krystal Boese, Michaela Braun, Cody DeHamer, Timothy Dziedzic, Joseph Eddy, Heather Edgren, Wayne Frome, Nolan Herman, Mitchell Hertel, Erin Higdon, Rosebud Johnson, Steve Kaiser, Tammy Koepel, Sarah Kohn, Taylor Kent, Thao Le, Carrie Marcis, Megan Maronde, Isaac McCready, Nidhi Mehta, Daniel Miesbauer, Anne Nikolai, Brooke Olson, Lisa Ott, Cory Pike, Nicole Price, Christopher Reardon, Logan Schafer, Rachel Schoone, Jaclyn Schneider, Tapan Sharma, Melissa Strupp, Janay Walters, Alyssa Weber, Reynor Wilhorn, Ryan Wright, Benjamin Zimmerman, Marshfield Clinic Research Laboratory; Angela Hunt, Jessica Lundgreen, Karley Respet, Jennifer Viergutz, Daniel Stafki, St. Luke's Regional Health Care System; Alberto J. Caban-Martinez, Natasha Schaefer-Solle, Paola Louzado Feliciano, Carlos Silvera, Karla Montes, Cynthia Beaver, Katerina Santiago, University of Miami; Sarang K. Yoon, Kurt Hegmann, Andrew L. Phillips, Rachel T. Brown, Camie Schaefer, Arlyne Arteaga, Matthew Bruner, Daniel Dawson, Emilee Eden, Jenna Praggastis, Joseph Stanford, Jeanmarie Mayer, Marcus Stucki, Riley Campbell, Kathy Tran, Madeleine Smith, Braydon Black, Madison Tallman, Chapman Cox, Derrick Wong, Michael Langston, Adriele Fugal, Fiona Tsang, Maya Wheeler, Gretchen Maughan, Taryn Hunt-Smith, Nikki Gallacher, Anika DSouza, Trevor Stubbs, Iman Ibrahim, Ryder Jordin, University of Utah; Marilyn J. Odean, Whiteside Institute for Clinical Research; Allen Bateman, Erik Reisdorf, Kyley Guenther, Erika Hanson, Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene; the HEROES-RECOVER participants.

All authors have completed and submitted the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors form for disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. Matthew S. Thiese reports grants and personal fees from Reed Group and the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, outside the submitted work. No other potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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