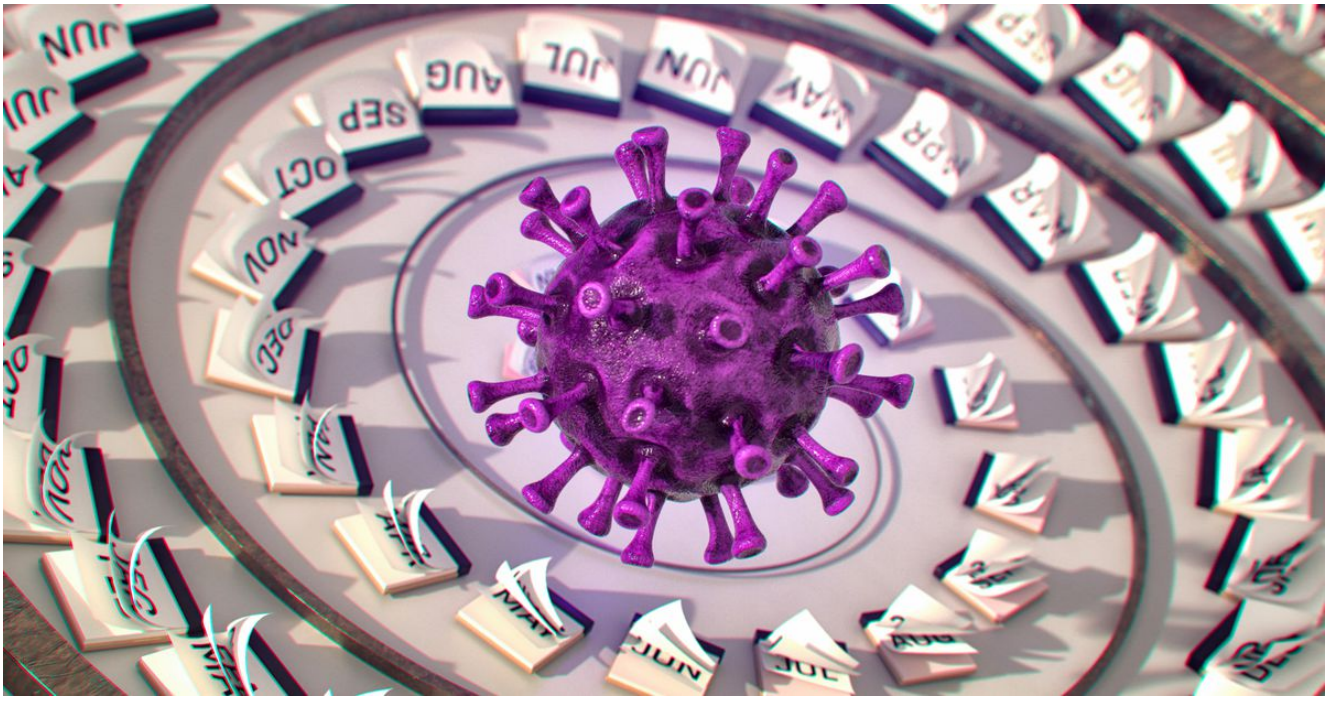
No one knows when the COVID-19 pandemic will end



If you've been marking the pandemic by the pileup of cautious reopenings and rescheduled events, you might think that an end to this global disaster is in sight. Event planners for the Kentucky Derby and Bonnaroo already have new opening days on the books in September. The Olympics are scheduled to start in Tokyo on July 23rd, 2021. There's just one problem: if anyone says that they know exactly when this pandemic will be over, they are lying.

No one can see the future. The virus is an unknown player, and the best minds on Earth can't do more than make educated guesses about what comes next and when. Hell, we didn't even notice the blood clot situation until just recently.

I know. A guess is not comforting when you're dreading another week of monotony in the same four walls. End dates are comforting. Reopenings are comforting. Contemplating a future that looks a lot like our cozy, crowded past is *way* more comforting than our isolated present. But let's not confuse comfort for truth.

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When bowling alleys and tattoo parlors reopened in Georgia on Friday, the pandemic was not over. It won't be over when the stay-at-home order in Michigan (maybe) lifts on May 15th or *if* the stay-at-home order in the Bay Area actually ends on May 31st.

The dates politicians are throwing around are not finish lines. They aren't guesses at an end date for this pandemic, either. Shelter-in-place orders are just time-outs. We have no sure-fire treatments for the virus, no vaccine, and a limited supply of health care workers. To keep as many people alive as possible, we've done the only thing we can do to slow the spread: we've hid from each other.

The virus's effects have not been, as some proposed, a great equalizer. The less you have, the harder you're hit. The federal government has mostly failed at leading a coherent response to the pandemic. Doctors are clashing with the FBI over PPE, then running into the ER with whatever they can scrounge up. Governors are hitting up their private-jet-owner friends to have masks flown in from China to equip their hospitals. Nurses at other facilities are resorting to wearing garbage bags in an unsuccessful bid to avoid contracting the virus on the job.

People who are already vulnerable are getting hit the hardest. Death rates have soared in black communities already slammed by other public health crises. On the Navajo Nation, experts worry that water shortages are contributing to the virus's continued spread. The virus has raged through cramped homeless shelters and through the communities that can't afford to distance themselves. "It's become very clear to me what a socioeconomic disease this is," an ER doctor working in Elmhurst, Queens . "People hear that term 'essential workers.' Short-order cooks, doormen, cleaners, deli workers—that is the patient population here." In some US prisons, the vast

majority of inmates are testing positive for the virus, leaving incarcerated persons in fear for their lives. One inmate, Sterling Rivers, grimly observed that “Our sentences have turned into death sentences” in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*. Our failures around the coronavirus are systemic failures of public policy.

Thanks to an inconsistent and often incoherent government response in the US, we now face an uncertain timeline for both economic and health recoveries

Those failures have left the health care system struggling to cope, plunged society into a well of uncertainty, and sent the economy cratering. Thanks to an inconsistent and often incoherent government response in the US, we now face an uncertain timeline for both economic and health recoveries. Twenty-six million people have filed unemployment claims.

And so some governors will call an end to stay-home orders in the hopes of resuscitating their economies. In Georgia, South Carolina, and parts of Tennessee, that time came on Friday. Other states, like California and New York, are taking a longer view, gradually easing some restrictions on movement while enforcing new requirements — masks on, low temps, can’t lose.

As cases decrease, restrictions will relax. But once we let our guard down, we’ll likely see resurgences of cases, once again straining health resources — leaving us with no choice but to close ourselves off again. That’s what’s happening in parts of China now, where new outbreaks of the same disease have emerged. The open-and-shut economy will likely continue as cases ebb and flow.

There are paths to victory, but as Ezra Klein notes at *Vox*, “these aren’t plans for returning to anything even approaching normal.” Victory over the virus will involve a lot of things that we don’t have yet. Scientific discoveries will help defeat the virus — but science can’t do it alone. Public

policies will play a huge role, and even with firm health guidelines and speedy scientific developments, it will take longer than we want for us to truly eke out a win.

What does a win look like? It will take widespread tests of everyone who might be sick and careful quarantining of anyone who tests positive. It will take armies of contact tracers to trace down anyone who might have been exposed. These low-tech interventions are the best thing we've got while we give researchers the time they need to come up with other solutions.

Our brightest prospects — vaccines and treatments — are still in the minors

Scientists will labor over vaccines and treatments, but the overwhelming majority of their trials will turn up nothing useful. They'll also keep trying to understand the virus and our bodies' complicated response to it, in the hopes of developing legitimate antibody tests. Eventually, we may discover something that destroys the virus without wrecking our bodies. But none of that is ready today.

The end is still likely to be a long way away, as journalist Ed Yong writes in *The Atlantic*: "The pandemic is not a hurricane or a wildfire. It is not comparable to Pearl Harbor or 9/11. Such disasters are confined in time and space. The SARS-CoV-2 virus will linger through the year and across the world."

Consider this a rebuilding year. It might even turn into rebuilding *years*, depending on our progress. Our brightest prospects — vaccines and treatments — are still in the minors. Even antibody testing isn't ready to be called up to the big leagues, at least not yet.

This is a long game, and focusing on the victory celebrations — like New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio's plan to "throw the biggest, best parade to honor" health care workers — won't get

us to the end.

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If we focus on what victory looks like instead of what it takes to get us there, we're going to keep being disappointed. We'll feel defeated every time a drug fails in testing. We can't let it get to us like that. The parades, the ballgames, the worship services that we're looking forward to, those will be there once this is over. What we've got to ensure now is that when we get to reopening day – whenever it is – that our concert halls and stadiums and spiritual homes are filled with as many of our human siblings as we can possibly save.

It still sucks when the goalposts move from April 15th to April 30th, then to May 15th. It feels like we're Charlie Brown and the end to this is a football that Lucy keeps pulling away. But when it comes to the virus itself, the clock isn't the statistic that matters. These are the ones that do: numbers of tests, numbers of new infections, and numbers of bodies in the morgues.

When the numbers of tests go up and confirmed cases and deaths go down, then our playbook will change. But it won't be the end of the fight – not yet.

We won't be able to mark this finale in our calendars
We play this through to the end – there is no other option. Victory might look like a vaccine. It might look like a robust testing regime or a new treatment. It might look like us cobbling together a sense of normalcy and still watching for repeated outbreaks. Whatever form it takes, we'll fight our way there with masks, thermometers, and soap, buying some time along the way. We'll adjust our playbook as the virus adapts. We'll position ourselves farther apart. We'll do it again, and again when the next waves of this virus come. We will be exhausted when we get there, but we will get there. But if we don't pace ourselves for the long haul, it will be that much

harder to get through.

We won’t be able to mark this finale in our calendars. All we can do is get through today, pushing our leaders to get the people on the front lines the resources and time they need to get us through this. We need politicians who will stop telling us the comforting things we want to hear and start acting to keep as many of us alive as possible.

***Correction 4/29**: On Friday, 4/24. Michigan extended their stay-at-home order to May 15 from April 30. This article has been updated to include the new date.*

https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/29/21239689/coronavirus-pandemic-end-covid19-reopen-vaccine-treatment-testing