

HHS Provides Updates on COVID-19, Vaccine Recommendations, and No-Cost Vaccine Access Program

Category: Policy Blog

written by Chelsea Gutierrez | October 25, 2023

On September 19, 2023, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs (IEA) held a briefing on COVID-19 Vaccine Updates. This call was led by Secretary Xavier Becerra and included updates from the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Dr. Mandy Cohen, and the Director of the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research (CBER) at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Dr. Peter Marks, on the new COVID vaccine, CDC's Bridge Access Program which provides no-cost COVID-19 vaccines, ongoing mitigation measures, and Strategic National Stockpile (SNS).

Vaccine Recommended as Best Measure Against Long COVID

Currently, there is an underlying immunity due to 97% of people across the United States either having been vaccinated or had COVID previously. However, based on data it, appears that this protection decreases over time. The most protection is provided in the first 4-6 months after receiving the vaccine, and it can take up to two weeks for your immune system to build up the immunity needed to fight off the virus.

The CDC is concerned as we are still seeing hundreds of people die every week, with people over 65 at the highest risk for negative outcomes. Secretary Becerra highlighted the need for assistance from the public because people are dying in numbers we weren't seeing as recently as a month ago. Regarding long COVID, the CDC shared there is still much to be learned. In the meantime, the recommendation continues to be to receive the vaccine as it's the best way to reduce any risk of getting long COVID. Both the CDC and FDA recommend that everyone over the age of 6 months receive not only the updated COVID vaccine, but the flu and RSV (Respiratory Syncytial Virus) vaccines as well. Dr. Cohen mentioned that the Maternal RSV vaccine will be available soon, specifically for expecting mothers which, as of [September 22](#), is officially recommended by the CDC. There is a strong emphasis from HHS, CDC, and the FDA to get vaccinated as this is the first time we have *ever* had immunizations for all three major respiratory viruses.

Updated COVID Vaccine Available at No-Cost through Bridge Access Program

The FDA has approved a new COVID vaccine, updated to match the strain that is currently circulating. The FDA recommendation is for those ages 5 years and older to receive a single dose, regardless of whether an individual has previously been vaccinated. For ages 6 months to 4 years, children are eligible to receive two doses of either Moderna or Pfizer. An important note for the immunocompromised is that a second or additional vaccine may be necessary. If someone currently has COVID but wants to receive the new vaccine, it is recommended to wait two months from the time since having COVID or receiving a previous vaccination. Dr. Marks reiterated confidence in the safety and effectiveness of these updated vaccines, while recognizing they may need to be updated on an annual basis, similar to what is done for the seasonal influenza vaccine.

Even though we are outside of the Public Health Emergency (PHE), Dr. Cohen emphasized that the updated COVID vaccine will still be available for free. This is either through insurance or through

the CDC's [Bridge Access Program](#) for those uninsured or underinsured where vaccines can be received at pharmacies such as CVS or Walgreens. Follow [this link](#) to find sites where free vaccines can be obtained, as well as additional resources. Secretary Beccera explained that this bridge program has received substantial funding from HHS, and that HHS has been in contact with private plans, as well as Medicaid and Medicare, so that there are no issues with receiving the vaccine at no cost.

Other COVID Related Updates

[HHS' Project NextGen](#) will begin working with scientists to explore what next steps may be necessary to continue combatting the spread of the virus. Related to this, Secretary Beccera gave an update on the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS), which is a resource to supplement state and local supplies during public health emergencies. It can be utilized as a short-term buffer when the supply of these materials is not immediately available or is not sufficient to match immediate need. Currently, the SNS is being prepared so that there isn't an emergency situation where there aren't enough masks, vaccines, or tests available. Secretary Becerra explained that they have learned from the pandemic as to what they need to do to be prepared, especially in addressing supply chain issues.