



Alliance for
Patient Access

JULY 2024

Increasing Vaccination Against COVID-19

Highlights from an
Expert Roundtable Discussion





Introduction

Ongoing vaccination against COVID-19 remains an important public health precaution. But many Americans don't recognize that fact—or lack the ability to act on it.

This was the conclusion of a group of experts from government, health care and the patient advocacy community that convened in Washington, DC in June 2024. The group's combined insights revealed several core challenges—and potential solutions—for facing the ongoing threat of COVID-19.

Barriers to Vaccination

People who do not stay up to date with their COVID-19 vaccinations often experience one of the following challenges.



Reduced sense of urgency.

Data on COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths were once the sole focus of nearly every media outlet. As time has passed, public attention has focused elsewhere. Without visible reminders of COVID-19's impact, many people no longer feel the need to protect themselves by getting vaccinated.



Logistical challenges.

The simple act of making an appointment to get vaccinated can deter some people. With vaccination now frequently available in pharmacies, people may see signs when they visit the pharmacy for routine items and be reminded of the need to get vaccinated—but then fail to follow through.



Unawareness of risk factors.

Older Americans may not realize that age itself is a risk factor for COVID-19, even in the absence of other medical conditions. Seniors who do not recognize their own vulnerability may not see the need to get vaccinated.



Reduced will to fight.

For children, pediatricians' exhaustion with parent pushback can be a barrier to vaccination. Resistance to COVID vaccines has prompted tense conversations between some parents and health care providers. In response, some clinicians have simply stopped pushing for children to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

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Federal Funding & Vaccine Access

Notwithstanding these barriers, patients who want to protect themselves against the threat of COVID-19 have, to date, had an avenue to do so. Many private insurers cover the cost of vaccination under the umbrella of preventive care. Patients who are uninsured or underinsured previously could get vaccinated at no cost under the Bridge Access Program, an initiative of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But the sunset of the Bridge Access Program in August 2024 introduces uncertainty about the future availability of free COVID-19 vaccines.

Privately insured patients, as well as those receiving Medicaid and Medicare benefits, may still be able to access vaccines. But, according to the CDC, 25-30 million adults in the United States lack insurance, not to mention those whose insurance does not cover the full cost of vaccination.¹

As cost barriers materialize, at-risk populations may face difficult decisions—and be forced to brave virus season without protection. People who work with at-risk populations encounter a double risk. Non-medical staff at long-term care facilities, for example, benefit from vaccine protection themselves as much as for the vulnerable population they serve. These facilities, however, may lack the infrastructure or model to ensure that their staff is properly vaccinated.

As federal funding support ends, additional barriers may crop up. Private health insurers may look to their pharmacy benefit managers to minimize costs by limiting coverage to a single COVID-19 vaccine. Without choice among COVID-19 vaccine options, patients may opt to go unvaccinated.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *CDC to Launch "Bridge Access Program" in Fall 2023 to Provide Free COVID-19 Vaccines to Uninsured and Underinsured Adults*. 2023.

Finding Solutions

Understanding why vaccination rates were low during the 2023-2024 season can help decision-makers identify policies and solutions to improve rates in the future. Several opportunities to improve uptake were clear.



Make COVID-19 vaccination routine. Normalizing consistent vaccination against COVID-19 can simplify the process and keep more people protected. Experts suggest aligning the messaging and, where possible, the timing of COVID-19 vaccination to sync with routine flu vaccination.



Establish alternate options to keep COVID-19 vaccination free. As the Bridge Access Program sunsets, policymakers face the challenge of establishing ongoing funding for COVID-19 vaccination.

- **317 Program Funding.** One option is to incorporate COVID-19 vaccines into programming provided under Section 317 of the Public Health Service Act. This CDC program grants funding to states to vaccinate underserved populations.
- **Vaccines for Adults.** Another possible solution is to establish a Vaccines for Adults program modeled after the national Vaccines for Children program. As envisioned in President Joe Biden's Fiscal Year 2024 budget proposal, a newly formed Vaccines for Adults program would "provide uninsured adults with access to routine and outbreak vaccines at no cost."²



Preserve coverage policies that protect patient, provider and pharmacist choice. Personal choice and patient-centered care have emerged as core messages in public dialogue about COVID-19 vaccination. Maintaining coverage policies that empower patients and their health care providers to select the vaccine that works best for them can allow patients to continue getting vaccinated on their own terms.

Similarly, continued reimbursement for providers and pharmacists who offer vaccine counseling can encourage conversations that allow patients to remain comfortable and confident getting vaccinated.



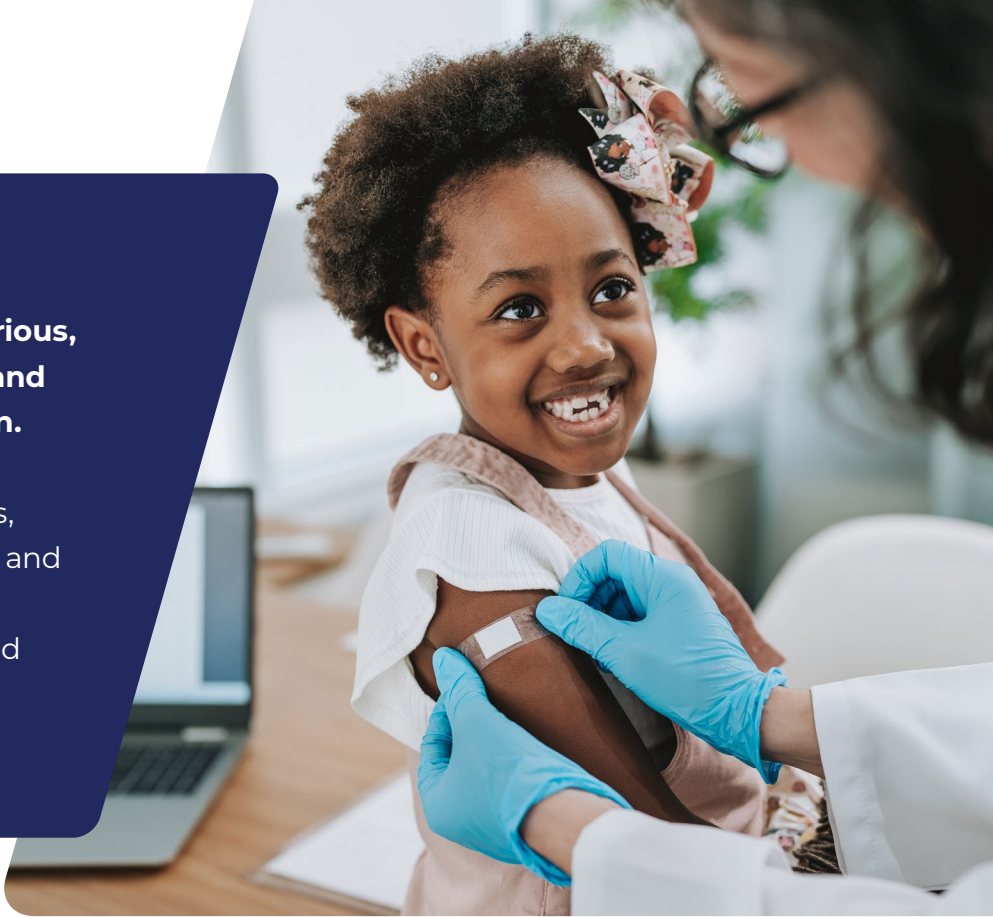
Issue clear and consistent messages. Unified communication across public health entities and including individual health care providers can effectively convey that vaccination against COVID-19 is a necessary, ongoing protective measure. Clear terminology—such as what constitutes a “booster”—is important, as is a regular cadence of information. Patients may also benefit from select data points that reinforce the danger posed by COVID-19, especially for at-risk populations.

1. Office of Management and Budget. Budget of the U.S. Government - Fiscal Year 2024.

Conclusion

The risks of COVID-19 remain serious, as does the need to encourage and facilitate widespread vaccination.

Working together toward timely and sound solutions, policymakers, pharmacists, providers, advocates and patients can align on strategies to keep people vigilant and motivated about ongoing vaccination.



ABOUT THE COVID-19 VACCINATION EXPERT ROUNDTABLE EVENT

The June 2024 Expert Roundtable was hosted by the Alliance for Patient Access.

Participants represented a range of public health and patient advocacy institutions and organizations, including:

Alliance for Aging Research

Association of
Immunization Managers

Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention

National Adult and Influenza
Immunization Summit

National Association of County &
City Health Officials

National Community
Pharmacists Association

National Hispanic Health
Foundation

Vaccinate Your Family

Why We Vaccinate



**Alliance for
Patient Access**

ABOUT THE ALLIANCE FOR PATIENT ACCESS

The Alliance for Patient Access is a national network of policy-minded health care providers advocating for patient-centered care.

AllianceforPatientAccess.org

