

Biden to announce plan to battle Omicron, Delta variants this winter

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(HealthDay)—President Joe Biden plans to announce a new round of measures to protect Americans against the spread of coronavirus variants on Thursday.

The strategy will include making rapid at-home COVID-19 tests free for more people, extending rules on mask wearing on planes and other modes of transport, launching public awareness campaigns on

vaccinations and booster shots, starting family mobile vaccination clinics, and implementing tougher testing requirements for travelers arriving in the country.

"Free and highly available rapid tests would be a game-changer," Charity Dean, a former California health official and CEO of the Public Health Company. "If we had rapid tests at every door for every school, every movie theater, any person can go and get them—just like they can in many other countries—it would enable people to have personal responsibility and know when they're infectious."

Under Biden's new plan, Americans covered by [private health insurance](#) would be reimbursed for buying rapid, at-home coronavirus test kits.

As part of the overall strategy, it's also expected that a rule requiring travelers to wear masks on airplanes, trains and busses and at airports and transit stations that was set to expire on Jan. 18 will be extended until mid-March, a person familiar with the decision told *The New York Times*.

The measures, which Biden is set to formally announce at the National Institutes of Health later on Thursday, will enable businesses and schools to remain open while keeping people safe, according to the White House.

"We are pulling out all the stops to get people the maximum amount of protection as we head into winter months," a senior administration official said during a conference call with reporters on Wednesday night, the *Washington Post* reported.

New measures to combat the coronavirus are long overdue, according to some public [health](#) experts.

They say [vaccine hesitancy](#) makes the nation vulnerable to a potential winter surge of infections, the *Post* reported.

As of Dec. 1, only 59.4% of Americans were considered fully vaccinated against the virus, the *Post* reported.

"We're going the wrong way" on vaccination status, said Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, adding that the United States should aim to immunize at least 80 percent of its population. But "we're at 59 [percent] and fading," Topol told the *Post*, and many vaccinated Americans' protection has likely waned because they have yet to get booster shots.

The nation's testing capability also remains inadequate, with many Americans unable to obtain [rapid tests](#) they could take before going to work or family gatherings, especially during regional outbreaks, Topol and other experts noted.

"So much of the next phase of COVID depends on easy, rapid access to testing, whether it's Omicron or quick access to oral treatments" or compliance with employer vaccine mandates, said Nirav Shah, president of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials and director of Maine's Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

"About the only thing I am sure of in this is that I would rather confront Omicron vaccinated and boosted," William Hanage, an epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, told the *Post*. "So boosters should be a major deal."

More information: Visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for more on [COVID testing](#).

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