

Biden pivots to home tests to confront omicron surge

December 21 2021, by Josh Boak, Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Colleen Long



President Joe Biden speaks about the COVID-19 response and vaccinations, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021, in the State Dining Room of the White House in Washington. Credit: AP Photo/Patrick Semansky

Fighting [the omicron variant](#) surging through the country, President Joe Biden announced the government will provide 500 million free rapid home-testing kits, increase support for hospitals under strain and redouble vaccination and boosting efforts.

At the White House on Tuesday, Biden detailed major changes to his COVID-19 winter plan, his hand forced by the fast-spreading variant, whose properties are not yet fully understood by scientists. Yet his message was clear that the winter holidays could be close to normal for the vaccinated while potentially dangerous for the unvaccinated.

His pleas are not political, he emphasized. He noted that former President Donald Trump has gotten his booster shot, and he said it's Americans' "patriotic duty" to get vaccinated.

"It's the only responsible thing to do," the president said. "Omicron is serious and potentially deadly business for unvaccinated people."

Biden chastised social media and people on cable TV who have made misleading statements to discourage people from getting vaccinated.

The outbreak from this latest strain of the coronavirus has required the federal government to get more aggressive in addressing the wave of infections, but Biden promised a weary nation that there would not be a mass lockdown of schools or businesses.



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"I know you're tired, and I know you're frustrated. We all want this to be over. But we're still in it," Biden said. "We also have more tools than we had before. We're ready, we'll get through this."

Scientists don't know everything about omicron yet, but they do know that vaccination should offer strong protection against severe illness and death. The variant has spread at such an alarming rate since it was identified in South Africa about a month ago that the Biden administration snapped into action to [offer new tests and additional aid](#). Still more is needed, some medical experts said.

A cornerstone of the plan is for the government to purchase 500 million coronavirus rapid tests for free shipment to Americans starting in January. People will use a new website to order their tests, which will then be sent by U.S. mail at no charge. The 500 million could be increased, depending on developments.

It marks a major shift for Biden, who earlier had called for many Americans to purchase the hard-to-find tests on their own and then seek reimbursement from health insurance. For the first time, the U.S. government will send free COVID-19 tests directly to Americans, after more than a year of urging by public health experts.



Dr. Sydney Sewall fills a syringe with the COVID-19 vaccine at the Augusta Armory, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021, in Augusta, Maine. Gov. Mills' administration opened the vaccination clinic earlier this month. Credit: AP Photo/Robert F.

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Experts had criticized Biden's initial buy-first, get-paid-later approach as unwieldy and warned that the U.S. would face another round of testing problems at a critical time. Testing advocates point to [nations including the U.K. and Germany](#), which have distributed billions of tests to the public and recommend people test themselves twice a week.

The federal government will also establish new testing sites and use the Defense Production Act to help manufacture more tests. The first new federally supported testing site will open in New York this week. The new sites will add to 20,000 already available. White House officials said they're working with Google so that people will be able to find them by searching "free COVID test near me."

Still, Biden's testing surge would need to be supported by a further jump in production for all Americans to test at the recommended rate of twice weekly. The U.S. would need 2.3 billion tests per month for everyone 12 and older to do that, according to the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation. That's nearly five times the half-billion tests Biden will deploy.

Currently, the U.S. can conduct about 600 million tests per month, with home tests accounting for about half, according to researchers from Arizona State University.



People stand in a line spanning several blocks for COVID-19 testing, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021, at a Curative testing kiosk outside an elementary school in northwest Washington. Credit: AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin

In another prong to Biden's amped-up plan, he is prepared to deploy an additional 1,000 troops with medical skills to assist hospitals buckling under the virus surge. Also, he is immediately sending federal medical personnel to Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Arizona, New Hampshire and Vermont. And there are plans to ready additional ventilators and protective equipment from the national stockpile, expanding hospital resources.

As a backstop, the Federal Emergency Management Agency will deploy hundreds of ambulances and paramedic teams so that if one hospital fills

up, it can transport patients to open beds in another. Ambulances are already headed to New York and Maine, and paramedic teams are going to New Hampshire, Vermont and Arizona.

But vaccination remains the main defense, since it can head off disease in the first place. The government will support multiple vaccination sites and provide hundreds of personnel to administer shots. New rules will make it easier for pharmacists to work across state lines to administer a broader range of shots.

Biden said in response to a question that he may lift the Southern Africa travel ban that was imposed to delay omicron from reaching the U.S.



Jose Ivanildo, who lost the use of his legs due to infantile paralysis, uses a skateboard as he begs for money at a traffic light dressed as Santa Claus in Brasilia,

Brazil, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021. The 48-year-old, known as "Ivanildo do Skate," said that the COVID-19 pandemic has made people scared to open their windows. Credit: AP Photo/Eraldo Peres

Some prominent experts said that Biden's new actions are a step in the right direction but he hasn't gone far enough, given the risks of infections and hospitals being overwhelmed.

"I don't know that the measures being proposed are going to be adequate," said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

Hotez said the government may need to authorize a second booster shot for health care workers to prevent infections that would sideline clinicians when all hands are needed.

Dr. Eric Topol, professor of molecular medicine at Scripps Research in La Jolla, California, said the administration "finally sees the light" with Biden's plan to ship 500 million tests, but "we need to pull out all the stops, and we're not doing that still."

"We don't have control of this pandemic here," said Topol.



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He said the government could redefine "fully vaccinated" as three shots instead of two of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, Biden could order a ban on air travel by people who are not fully vaccinated, and the government could use its authority to ramp up production of high quality masks for free distribution.

"There's a lack of boldness," Topol said. "I am disappointed."

Scientists say omicron spreads even more easily than other coronavirus strains, including delta. It accounted for nearly three-quarters of new

U.S. infections last week.

Underscoring the reach of the virus, the White House said late Monday that Biden had been in close contact with a staff member who later tested positive for COVID-19. The staffer spent about 30 minutes around the president on Air Force One on Friday. The staffer, who was fully vaccinated and boosted, tested positive Monday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.



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Psaki said Biden has tested negative twice since Sunday and will test again on Wednesday. He cleared his throat several times at Tuesday's event but spoke firmly and appeared fine.

In New York City, [nearly 42,600 people citywide tested positive](#) from Wednesday through Saturday—compared with fewer than 35,800 in the entire month of November. The city has never had so many people test positive in such a short period of time since testing became widely available.

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Citation: Biden pivots to home tests to confront omicron surge (2021, December 21) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-biden-pivots-home-omicron-surge.html>

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