

## Biden to pledge 500M free COVID-19 tests to counter omicron

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

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President Joe Biden speaks about the COVID-19 variant named omicron during a visit to the National Institutes of Health on Dec. 2, 2021, in Bethesda, Md. Biden plans to stress in a Dec. 21 speech the importance of getting vaccinated to protect from a wave of COVID-19 infections tied to the new omicron variant as Christmas approaches. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File

With [the omicron variant](#) on the march, President Joe Biden plans to announce 500 million free rapid tests for Americans, increased support for hospitals under strain and a redoubling of vaccination and boosting efforts.

In a speech scheduled for Tuesday afternoon, Biden is detailing major changes to his COVID-19 winter plan, his hand forced by the arrival of the fast-spreading variant, whose properties are yet not fully understood by scientists.

The world is confronting the prospect of a second straight holiday season with COVID-19 as families and friends begin to gather. Scientists don't yet know whether omicron causes more serious disease, but they do know that vaccination should offer strong protections against severe illness and death. The White House provided [details on the proposals](#) Biden will announce in his speech.

A cornerstone of the plan is Biden's decision for the government to purchase 500 million coronavirus rapid tests and ship them free to Americans starting in January. People will use a new website to order their tests, which will then be sent to them by U.S. mail at no charge, the White House said.

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 their 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.

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 problems with testing at a critical time. Testing advocates point to countries like 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 testing 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 fall far short of the levels needed 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 more than 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.

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. Additionally, he is immediately sending federal medical personnel to Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Arizona, New Hampshire and Vermont. There are also 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, they can transport patients to open beds in other facilities.

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 stand up 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.

For those who are already fully vaccinated, a booster shot has been shown in lab tests to provide strong protection against omicron. Although reports of breakthrough cases abound, data show that vaccinated people who become infected are much less likely to suffer serious disease leading to hospitalization or death. To the unvaccinated, Biden plans to deliver a stern admonition that they're risking their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

In a preview of Biden's speech, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at Monday's press briefing that the Democratic president doesn't plan to impose any lockdowns and will instead be encouraging people to get inoculated—and, if they're eligible, to get their booster shot.

"This is not a speech about locking the country down. This is a speech about the benefits of being vaccinated," Psaki told reporters.

Biden has found himself in the delicate position of both alerting the country to the dangers posed by omicron and reassuring Americans that the vaccines will protect them. White House officials are looking to ease the nation back toward accepting the reality of an endemic virus with far lower stakes for the vaccinated. This has meant setting a difficult balance as cases rise and as [deaths and serious illness among the unvaccinated](#) dominate headlines.

There are 40 million eligible but unvaccinated American adults. Efforts to increase vaccination rates have struggled to overcome a series of political, social and cultural divides. Psaki said the president plans to

appeal to survival instincts.

"Our health experts assess that you are 14 times more likely to die of COVID if you have not been vaccinated versus vaccinated," she said Monday.

Scientists say [omicron spreads even easier](#) 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 on a trip from Orangeburg, South Carolina, to Philadelphia. The staffer, who was fully vaccinated and boosted, tested positive earlier Monday, Psaki said.

Psaki said Biden has tested negative twice since Sunday and will test again on Wednesday. Citing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Psaki said Biden didn't need to quarantine and would continue with his regular schedule.

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.

The latest outbreak reflects the global challenges of stopping the coronavirus pandemic.

The Dutch government began [a tough nationwide lockdown](#) on Sunday to rein in sharply rising infections, but many European leaders have

opted for something less. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said officials have decided against imposing further restrictions, at least for now.

France and Germany have barred most British travelers from entering, and the government in Paris has banned public concerts and fireworks displays at New Year's celebrations.

Stock markets in Asia, Europe and the U.S. fell on Monday with the expectation that the infections could weigh on global economic growth and worsen global supply chain challenges.

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Citation: Biden to pledge 500M free COVID-19 tests to counter omicron (2021, December 21) retrieved 22 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-biden-pledge-500m-free-covid-.html>

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