

US drugstores squeezed by vaccine demand, staff shortages

December 4 2021, by Tom Murphy



A sign is posted outside a CVS pharmacy on Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021 in Indianapolis. A rush of vaccine-seeking customers and staff shortages are squeezing drugstores around the country. That has led to frazzled workers and even temporary pharmacy closures. Credit: AP Photo/Tom Murphy

A rush of vaccine-seeking customers and staff shortages are squeezing drugstores around the U.S., leading to frazzled workers and temporary pharmacy closures.

Drugstores are normally busy this time of year with flu shots and other vaccines, but now pharmacists are doling out a growing number of COVID-19 shots and giving coronavirus tests.

The push for shots is expected to grow more intense as President Joe Biden urges vaccinated Americans to get booster shots to combat the emerging omicron variant. The White House said Thursday that more than two in three COVID-19 vaccinations are happening at local pharmacies.

And pharmacists worry another job might soon be added to their to-do list: If regulators approve antiviral pills from drugmakers Merck and Pfizer to treat COVID-19, pharmacists may be able to diagnose infections and then prescribe pills to customers.

"There's crazy increased demand on pharmacies right now," said Theresa Tolle, an independent [pharmacist](#) who has seen COVID-19 vaccine demand quadruple since the summer at her Sebastian, Florida, store.

Pharmacists say demand for COVID-19 vaccines started picking up over the summer as the delta variant spread rapidly. Booster shots and the expansion of vaccine eligibility to include children have since stoked it.



Pharmacist Todd Gharibian, right, administers a dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to Toshiko Sugiyama, left, at a CVS Pharmacy branch on March 1, 2021, in Los Angeles. A rush of vaccine-seeking customers and staff shortages are squeezing drugstores around the country. That has led to frazzled workers and even temporary pharmacy closures. Credit: AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File

On top of that workload and routine prescriptions, many drugstores also have been asking pharmacists to counsel patients more generally on their health or about chronic conditions like diabetes and [high blood pressure](#).

Pharmacies also have been handling more phone calls from customers with questions about vaccines or COVID-19 tests, noted Justin Wilson, who owns three independent pharmacies in Oklahoma.

"We're all working a lot harder than we did before, but we're doing everything we can to take care of people," Wilson said, adding that he has not had to temporarily close any of his pharmacies or limit hours so far.

Tolle said she was lucky to hire a [pharmacy](#) resident just before the delta surge arrived. The new employee was supposed to focus mostly on diabetes programs but has largely been relegated to vaccine duty.

Tolle said her Bay Street Pharmacy is now giving about 80 COVID-19 vaccines a day, up from 20 before the delta wave.

"God's timing worked out well for me," she said. "We would not have gotten through without having that additional person here."



People wear mask as they shop and wait on line at a Walgreens in Wheeling, Ill., on Aug.18, 2021. A rush of vaccine-seeking customers and staff shortages are squeezing drugstores around the country. That has led to frazzled workers and even temporary pharmacy closures. Credit: AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh, File

Others haven't been as fortunate. A CVS Health store on the northeast side of Indianapolis shuttered its pharmacy in the middle of the afternoon Thursday due to staffing issues. A sign taped to the metal gate over the closed pharmacy counter also told customers that the pharmacy will soon start closing for a half hour each afternoon so the pharmacist can have a lunch break.

Such temporary closures have ebbed and flowed in pockets around the country throughout the pandemic, but they have grown more acute in recent months, said Anne Burns, a vice president with the American Pharmacists Association.

Pharmacies all need minimum staffing to operate safely, and they sometimes have to close temporarily if they fall below those levels.

Burns said many pharmacies already had relatively thin staffing levels heading into the pandemic, and a wave of pharmacists and pharmacy technicians left after the virus hit.

"There is a lot of stress and burnout for individuals who have been going at this since March of 2020," she said.

CVS Health spokesman T.J. Crawford said he couldn't comment on the circumstances for one store. But he said his company continues "to manage through a workforce shortage that isn't unique to CVS Health."



Belinda Perez, left, checks in with store manager Maria Gallardo at a COVID-19 vaccination site inside a CVS Pharmacy branch on March 1, 2021, in Los Angeles. A rush of vaccine-seeking customers and staff shortages are squeezing drugstores around the country. That has led to frazzled workers and even temporary pharmacy closures. Credit: AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File

Rival drugstore chain Walgreens also has adjusted pharmacy hours "in a limited number of stores," spokesman Fraser Engerman said.

Both companies are hiring. CVS Health says it has hired 23,000 employees from a push it started in September. About half of that total was pharmacy technicians, who can deliver vaccines.

As companies scramble to hire or keep staff, Burns and Tolle worry about adding even more responsibilities like diagnosing and treating COVID-19.

Tolle noted that it is not clear yet how pharmacists will be reimbursed for the time they take to diagnose and prescribe. That will have to be clarified, especially if cases surge again and drugstores need to add even more workers to help.

"We want to be able to help our communities," she said. "I don't know how pharmacies are going to manage it."

Sherri Brown, a city employee in Omaha, Nebraska, was searching for a [vaccine](#) booster dose, but two nearby pharmacies didn't have appointments available and a third didn't have the brand she wanted. She wound up getting a shot at a county-run clinic on Friday.

"I just wanted to protect myself," said Brown, who suffered through two weeks of coughing, headaches and fatigue when she caught the virus in January, before she was vaccinated. "I guess I'm encouraged to see that people are taking this more seriously."

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