

Omicron makes booster shots more critical for medically vulnerable seniors

January 28 2022, by Laurie Archbald-Pannone



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People are understandably worn out, tired of thinking about COVID-19 and wanting to get back to a true normal.

This so-called "[pandemic fatigue](#)" is real. But it's also [contributing to lapses in COVID-19](#) precautions and to more people getting infected with the omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2.

It is become starkly clear that this pandemic is not behind us yet. Since late December 2021, COVID-19 infections have been surging, [exceeding the rates seen](#) at any other point in the pandemic. The people who are becoming most sick—needing hospitalization or even dying from infection—[are the unvaccinated](#).

But new data suggests that older adults who have received two shots of the COVID-19 vaccine but who have not yet received a [booster shot](#) are also getting sick and [having poor outcomes](#). The omicron variant, which spreads very easily, is putting a spotlight on how critical it is for [these seniors to get a booster shot](#)—especially older adults living in close quarters with others.

As [a geriatrician](#) at the University of Virginia, I see patients who are over 65 years old. Many of them have experienced someone close to them becoming ill or even dying from COVID-19 infection in the past two years.

Having witnessed this directly, most of my patients continue to practice [safety measures](#) to minimize risk of infection, like wearing masks, limiting their exposure to large crowds and practicing social distancing. They want to be able to safely visit with their families and friends. A [booster](#) shot has now become an important part of protecting them against infection and poor outcomes.

The case for boosters

In September 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention endorsed booster shots for people 65 years old and up, as well as some

other high-risk groups. But since that time, [the need for booster shots](#) for all vaccine-eligible people has become more clear.

The CDC recently reported that vaccine effectiveness against hospitalizations from COVID-19 goes [from 38% up to 90%](#) with a third booster dose. The CDC is now calling having received a booster shot as being ["up to date"](#) on COVID-19 vaccination.

A need for renewed focus on boosters

Some of my patients live independently and have full access to schedule an appointment for their booster and drive themselves to a pharmacy to receive it. Others are not as mobile. Some are homebound or live in a long-term care facility, assisted-living facility or memory care unit. In these cases, my patients can only get vaccinated if the vaccine comes to them.

In December 2020 and January 2021, when the first COVID-19 vaccines were becoming available, there was a massive push to get vulnerable elderly people living in long-term care vaccinated. They were considered ["Phase 1 priority."](#) Teams of public health officials and pharmacy staff came to vaccinate these residents as quickly as possible. And the efforts were successful. Nearly 90% of the people [living in these types of congregate settings](#) received a COVID-19 vaccine.

But the recent numbers show that those herculean efforts may need to be replicated in order to [reach these community members](#) for booster shots. As of late January 2022, nearly 90% of people ages 65 and up have received two COVID-19 shots—but [about a third of those](#), or more than 15 million [older adults](#), haven't received their COVID-19 booster.

In many cases, booster shots will need to be taken to those who are unable to access them. The CDC's website emphasizes the need for

continuing to protect people who are "disproportionately affected by COVID-19," particularly those living in long-term care, or LTC, settings. "All LTC settings that request assistance accessing COVID-19 vaccines for their residents and staff will receive the support they need."

If you or someone you care for is living in a care facility, you can [find out how to request](#) on-site vaccination or access to a pharmacy location. Local health departments, pharmacies and hospitals may have teams established to vaccinate facility residents and staff on-site.

If [health care providers](#) can get the vast majority of vulnerable people up to date on vaccinations, perhaps it can help turn a corner in the pandemic so that we don't have to do it all over again in 2023.

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