

Will the COVID-19 vaccine become an annual dose like the flu shot? How will it work?

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Credit: Ruby Wallau/Northeastern University

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is considering a major change in the way COVID-19 vaccines and boosters are given that Northeastern

experts say would streamline the process for the public and for suppliers.

Rather than tacking on boosters as new variants arise, FDA officials are looking at transitioning to a single [vaccine](#) composition for COVID-19 and boosters, selecting for anticipated strains by the summer and administering one annual shot in the fall.

Public health professor Neil Maniar and supply chain expert Nada Sanders say simplifying the COVID-19 vaccination schedule would make the vaccination process less confusing and more accessible.

"We're at a point where there's a lot of COVID fatigue and confusion regarding vaccination recommendations," says Maniar, director of the master of public health program at Northeastern's Bouvé College of Health Sciences.

A vaccination schedule that mirrors one already in place for influenza "will be easier to follow and easier to communicate," he says.

"This is going to ease so much tension," says Sanders, a distinguished professor at Northeastern's D'Amore-McKim School of Business.

She says even with her educational credentials and connections to people in the [medical profession](#), "I was confused" about when to get a COVID-19 booster.

"This is going to improve access. It's going to improve costs," Sanders says.

Until now the development of COVID-19 vaccines and boosters has been in reaction to disease and variant outbreaks, she says.

"From a supply chain standpoint, any time you're in reactive mode it's

costly," Sanders says.

"There's no question that moving to a more predictable cycle would dramatically reduce overall costs" by allowing truckers and pharmacies to anticipate transportation and storage issues, she says.

A story on NPR Monday morning broke the news that the FDA was considering using an approach similar to the [flu vaccine](#) with annual updates to match circulating strains.

Also on Monday the FDA made public a briefing document on a Thursday (Jan. 26) meeting of the Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee that will "consider questions around simplifying the composition and immunization schedules of the authorized and approved COVID-19 vaccines, the process for determining the need for recommending a period update to COVID-19 vaccines and the timing for implementation of such an update."

"There's a solid system in place for how this will work," Maniar says. "It should be very doable."

In the spring, health experts will look at strains emerging around the world and use those findings to make recommendations for what the vaccine should be in the fall, he says.

Maniar says he doesn't know if an annual COVID-19 shot would be a better match for the coronavirus than the flu shots are for circulating strains of influenza, but says technology has developed to the point "we're able to address new variants in a pretty timely way."

People could get vaccinated against both COVID-19 and influenza at the same time, although the shots would be separate.

While most people would likely get just one COVID-19 shot under the new vaccination schedule, the FDA says [elderly people](#) and the very young would likely get two shots.

The goal is to increase the number of people vaccinated to keep disease from spreading and to prevent COVID-19 illnesses from becoming serious, Maniar says.

Simplifying the message to the public about when to get a COVID-19 shot will make people more likely to sign up for a shot, Sanders says.

It will also allow pharmacies to make plans for when they should expect to stock up and create refrigerated storage space, she says. "Every bit of handling is critical especially when dealing with a biologic like this. It's not a pair of sneakers you can leave in the hall."

"COVID has been very disruptive for both individuals and communities," Maniar says. "This schedule will provide another opportunity to help us navigate and co-exist with COVID in a way that buffers the disruption and keeps people healthy."

Provided by Northeastern University

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