

What to Know About the New Covid Shots

The updated shots are now available in the U.S. Here's who should get them and what to expect.



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Two new Covid shots have received the green light from the Food and Drug Administration as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The vaccines, developed by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, are recommended for everyone 6 months and up and are available at pharmacies across the country.

The vaccines provide much-needed protection as Covid cases continue to rise in some parts of the United States. Although the numbers of Covid hospitalizations and deaths have slowed over the last year, the virus has evolved and mutated into more than two dozen different variants. Most people's immunity has also waned.

Less than 20 percent of Americans got the previous booster — a bivalent shot that arrived last fall and was designed to protect against the original virus as well as Omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5. And while some parts of our immune system have long memories, the antibodies that help prevent infections decrease significantly in a matter of months.

The reformulated Covid shots can better help fight off the latest set of subvariants circulating in the U.S. Here's what to know before you roll up your sleeve.

How are the new Covid shots different from the last ones?

Unlike the bivalent shots from last fall, the latest mRNA vaccines developed by Pfizer and Moderna are monovalent, meaning they are designed to protect against just one variant: XBB.1.5, a recent descendant of Omicron that emerged earlier this year.

While XBB.1.5 is no longer the dominant circulating version, preliminary research has

shown that the new jabs should nonetheless offer protection against the variant EG.5, which is currently dominant, as well as other variants that have raised some concern among scientists, like BA.2.86. Data from a handful of academic labs suggests that patients infected with XBB.1.5 who had yet to receive the vaccine had developed enough neutralizing antibodies to “adequately handle” current versions of the virus, according to Dr. David Ho, a virologist at Columbia University. “We believe that would be equivalent to getting the XBB.1.5-based vaccine,” he said.

Vaccine makers Pfizer and Moderna have also announced that, according to their initial research, the new Covid vaccines provide good protection against both EG.5 and BA.2.86. Regulators will also consider a third monovalent shot developed by Novavax against XBB.1.5 in the coming months. The Novavax shot is protein-based, meaning it works differently from an mRNA vaccine.

The new vaccines do not include protection against the original virus, which may actually help broaden protection against new variants.

“Our immune system, when we have seen something, is biased to seeing that again,” Dr. Ho said. “So if you include the original components, the immune system will react mostly to the original component and not to the new version of the virus.” Initial data from preprint studies has suggested that the bivalent formula from last year was no more effective against BA.4 and BA.5 than the original vaccine it replaced because of this so-called “immune imprinting” bias.

The number of doses of the new vaccine you should get will depend on your age and prior immunizations: Everyone 5 years and older will be eligible for a single dose of an updated mRNA shot, regardless of their vaccination status. Children 6 months through 4 years old who have previously been vaccinated against Covid will be eligible for one or two doses, depending on which vaccine they received previously and the number of doses they got in the past. Children in that age group who have not been previously vaccinated will be eligible for two doses of the new Moderna vaccine or three doses of the new Pfizer vaccine.

Where can you get the new Covid vaccines?

Representatives of Walgreens and CVS have both said that their pharmacies will provide Covid shots to all who are eligible under the C.D.C. guidelines.

You may also be able to get the new vaccine at your local pharmacy, doctor’s office or public health department.

How much does the new shot cost?

In the beginning of the pandemic, the U.S. government bought hundreds of millions of vaccine doses and distributed them for free. Now, the cost of the reformulated shots is negotiated by private insurance companies and government payers like Medicare and Medicaid. For the most part, that means the vaccines remain free for those with private or public health insurance — as long as you get them through an in-network provider. However, some people have reported difficulty getting the shots because a handful of insurance providers have been slow to update their billing codes for the new vaccines.

Adults who are uninsured, as well as those whose insurance does not cover the entire cost of the new Covid vaccine, may be able to get the shots for free through the government's Bridge Access Program. This is a temporary program that will run through December 2024. It will help distribute vaccines at local health centers and pay for doses for uninsured adults at three pharmacy chains: CVS, Walgreens and eTrueNorth. A similar program helps provide the vaccine to uninsured and underinsured children.

Can you get the Covid vaccine and flu shot at the same time?

Yes. Just as they did last year, federal officials plan to urge everyone to get their shots at the same time. Research has shown that the Covid and flu vaccines are safe to get together, as are the flu shot and R.S.V. shot for older adults. There isn't sufficient data yet on pairing the R.S.V. vaccine with the Covid shot. But experts are hopeful that combining the vaccines will make it easier for more people to get protected, Dr. Ho said.