Mira Irons, MD, on improving access and convenience for vaccines

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Featured topic and speakers

In today's COVID-19 Update, AMA's Chief Health and Science Officer Mira Irons, MD, reviews COVID-19 numbers and trending topics related to the pandemic over the past week. She also discusses Pfizer's application for full approval for its vaccine, vaccination numbers and continuing efforts to get shots in arms..

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Speaker

- Mira Irons, MD, chief health and science officer, AMA

Transcript

**Unger:** Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today, we have our weekly look at the numbers, trends and latest news about COVID-19, with AMA's Chief Health and Science Officer Dr. Mira Irons in Chicago. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer also in Chicago. Well, Dr. Irons, let's start with vaccine news. Pfizer recently applied for full approval of its vaccine. What difference is that going to make, relative to the emergency use authorization that it receives some months ago?

**Dr. Irons:** You're right. This is a big step and we've been waiting for it. Emergency authorizations are designed to be temporary and it was always expected that the companies would gather all of the information needed to submit for an application for full approval, so that's what Pfizer did. It is a very exhaustive and rigorous process, and it is a process that could take months. However, if approved, it...
could make it easier for companies, government agencies and schools to require vaccinations and also prompt the military, which has had low opt-in rates, to mandate vaccines for service members. What they’re submitting includes six months of information on the vaccine safety and efficacy to the FDA, in addition to manufacturing information.

**Unger:** I'm assuming that would actually just add more confidence, especially important now, since we're seeing the pace of vaccination slowing?

**Dr. Irons:** Absolutely. The pace is slowing. When you look at how many doses are administered, we're administering about 1.98 million doses per day on average, which is a 41% decrease from the peak of 3.38 million reported on April 13. In response, President Biden set a goal last Tuesday of reaching 70% of adults to at least be partially vaccinated by July 4 and we're getting there. If you look at the data that the CDC put out, more than 57% of adults have received at least one shot. It's slow, but we're getting there.

**Unger:** Let's talk about that goal. It's aggressive and it does require a shift in strategy. Would you lay out some of those changes that we're going to be looking at in order to hit these numbers?

**Dr. Irons:** Yeah. I think the effort is really to get as many doses as possible to people where they are. The president announced a shift in strategy for mass vaccination sites to more local settings, to target younger Americans and those hesitant to get a shot. They're asking tens of thousands of pharmacies to allow people to walk in for shots. One of the barriers has been trying to get an appointment. The administration also ordered a pop-up and mobile clinics, especially in rural areas and it also plans to devote tens of millions of dollars for community outreach workers to provide transportation and help arrange childcare for those in high-risk neighborhoods. To build up confidence in vaccines, federal officials plan to enlist the help of family medicine and other physicians, trusted messengers, other emissaries who are trusted voices in the community.

**Unger:** Really two key issues there. Number one, is the access and so you talked a lot about those making it more convenient, making it more flexible and the second part is bringing physicians into the mix and a lot of physician offices may have not been participating up to this point, but now that we are at that place where it really takes someone that folks trust and we know that physicians are somebody they look to. That will be a very important part of this next traunch of perspective vaccines.

Well, let's talk a little bit about the ACIP. They're scheduled to meet this week to review the clinical trial data and make recommendations for Pfizer's vaccine use in adolescents, with an age of 12 to 15. Will this potentially help move the needle on our overall efforts?

**Dr. Irons:** You know we hope it will and we're expecting to see an uptick in vaccines with this extended authorization. Just to clarify, the first step in this process is that FDA action is required as an amendment to the existing emergency use authorization and then ACIP will meet to make recommendations for its use in this age range. Vaccinating children is key to raising the level of


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immunity in the overall population and bringing down the numbers of hospitalizations and deaths. While adolescents themselves are not as susceptible to severe disease, they can still get sick and infect others. It's welcome news to some parents who are anxious to protect their kids during summer activities and before the start of the school year, but it also poses another challenge to policy makers who are struggling to vaccinate a large percentage of adults hesitant to get the shot. Many more could refuse to inoculate their children.

**Unger:** Well, we're going to be talking later this week with Dr. Paul Offit after the ACIP meets, to address some of those concerns, so look forward to that in the coming days. Are we still seeing the effects of vaccination rollout in terms of the overall numbers, cases and deaths?

**Dr. Irons:** Yeah, we're starting to. If you look at the numbers for today, 32,708,348 cases and 581,756 deaths. However, the numbers are starting to go down. Across the country the outlook has improved, putting the U.S. in its best position against the virus yet. The nation's recording about 49,000 new cases per day, the lowest number since early October. Hospitalizations have also plateaued and are starting to decrease. The numbers are going down. Still higher than where we'd like them, but I think we're starting to see the effects of vaccination coming in.

**Unger:** That's good. We have to keep in mind a lot of the lulls in the pandemic that we saw at some points were short-lived and they gave way to surges, but I guess the big difference is that now we got more than half of American adults with at least one vaccine. Hopefully that will play into the impact there. In terms of specific states, any standouts in terms of issues with the pandemic?

**Dr. Irons:** Yeah. We're seeing pockets around the country. After weeks of patients flooding emergency rooms in Michigan, the worst COVID-19 hotspot in the nation, hospitalizations are finally falling. However, we're starting to see some small outbreaks. Infections are rising in places like Multnomah County, Oregon, which contains Portland; Pueblo County, Colorado; Grand County, Utah; Caldwell County, Kentucky. We expect to see more of these localized type outbreaks in months ahead. However, in some recent days, entire states, including Wisconsin and West Virginia, have reported zero new coronavirus deaths and particularly promising. If you think back to where things were in LA County, just a short time ago, LA County made headlines with the news that it had reported zero new deaths on that Sunday and Monday, early in May. Now the milestone was brief and the county reported 18 deaths on Tuesday, but it's notable for a metropolis the size of LA.

**Unger:** Yeah. That's a massive and obviously very welcomed change. You can see that this news, in regard to cases, is leading to what I call, I guess the theme of things across the U.S. would be reopening. How's that playing out and what do you see as the impact of that?

**Dr. Irons:** Well, it is. It's one word, it's reopening. In New York and Chicago officials are encouraged by recent progress, have confidently vowed to fully reopen in the coming weeks, including concerts, sporting events and restaurants. We're seeing mayors and governors pretty much across the board loosening restrictions. Public health experts still remain cautious, but said that while they expect
significant local and regional surges in the coming weeks, they do not think they'll be as widespread or reach past peaks. I think even more encouraging a modeling study released by the CDC last Wednesday, citing relaxed restrictions on a new contagious variant, suggested that cases could tick upward again in the coming weeks before a sharp drop-off by July. You know, Dr. Walensky, the director of the CDC, said we're not out of the woods yet, but we could be very close.

**Unger:** That is good and we'll keep our eye on that. Well, thank you so much, Dr. Irons for being here today and sharing your perspective. We'll see you next week for another update. In the meantime for resources on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us. Please take care.

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