Andrea Garcia, JD, MPH, discusses booster rollout and mask studies

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Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 Update, a discussion with AMA's Director of Science, Medicine & Public Health, Andrea Garcia, JD, MPH, on COVID-19 vaccine numbers and trending topics related to the pandemic over the past week. Also covering the booster rollout, mask studies in schools and the continued politicization of the pandemic.

Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center.

Speaker

Andrea Garcia, JD, MPH, director of science, medicine & public health, American Medical Association

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update video and podcast. Today we're taking our weekly look at the numbers, trends and latest news about COVID-19 with AMA's Director of Science, Medicine and Public Health Andrea Garcia in Chicago. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer, also in Chicago.

Andrea, big news this week continues to be boosters. We spoke with Dr. Sandra Fryhofer yesterday who helped us understand the Pfizer booster authorization and the data that supported it. Can you just quickly recap who can get the booster shot right now?

Garcia: Yeah, thanks for having me. And I recognize that it is confusing. So people who’ve received their second Pfizer vaccine at least six months ago are now eligible to receive a booster shot if they’re...
65 and older, residents of long-term care facilities or have certain underlying medical conditions. And then on Friday, we saw Dr. Walensky, the CDC director, expand that eligibility to also include people at greater risk of exposure to the virus because of occupational or institutional setting, which cleared the way for health care workers, teachers and other frontline workers also to be eligible for booster shots.

**Unger:** Well now we have these booster shots going. At the same time, of course, we’re trying to get everybody else vaccinated. How is the rollout, which begins immediately, how’s that going?

**Garcia:** So we’re starting to see states roll out booster shots for older and at-risk adults in the U.S., but many, like we said, are still trying to make sense of the guidance, which we know is broad. So the booster program, that’s going to look different than the initial vaccine robot, which relied on mass vaccination sites at stadiums and prevention centers. Instead, what we’re going to see with boosters is a reliance on pharmacies and primary care physicians and some smaller vaccination clinics that have really, over the past few months, become accustomed to offering vaccines.

The CDC said in their discussions that right now pharmacies are providing 70% of COVID vaccinations and the president said booster shots would be available at 80,000 locations around the country, including more than 40,000 pharmacies.

**Unger:** So obviously that kind of distribution on a quick decision like this is one of the challenges. Are there any other challenges about rolling out a program like this?

**Garcia:** Yeah, so I think some of the challenges are making sure that recipients of the Moderna and the J&J vaccine know that they are not yet eligible for boosters. This decision was based on the data from the Pfizer vaccine and that review is going to happen for Moderna and J&J, just on a slower timeline. The other is reaching isolated, elderly people and informing younger adults with medical conditions or jobs that place them at high risk that they may be eligible for a booster under the federal rules. So I think for these younger populations, whether or not get a booster is based on an individual assessment of risks and benefits. Since there may be some lingering confusion around who is eligible right now, state officials are encouraging people to call their physician or a local pharmacy if they have questions.

**Unger:** How big a population is this that we’re talking about, in terms of being eligible for the booster right now?

**Garcia:** In looking at the numbers, President Biden said that 20 million people could get boosters immediately and that’s based largely on the timing. So, you have to be six months out from your second Pfizer shot to be immediately eligible. That includes President Biden himself. We saw him receive his booster dose on Monday. As he received his vaccine, he urged Americans who haven’t gotten vaccinated to do so and he said he would continue to urge businesses to institute vaccine requirements. His exact words were, "Let me be clear. Boosters are important. But the most important
thing we need to do is to get more people vaccinated." In all, about 60 million people will be eligible for a third Pfizer shot over the coming months.

Unger: And to that point, still a lot of unvaccinated folks out there. What are the numbers looking like today?

Garcia: The pace of vaccination has really slowed considerably. We're seeing around 650,000 vaccine doses administered each day over the last week and that's down from more than 900,000 a day earlier this month. So, 213.7 million Americans have received one dose. That's 64.4% of the total population. And of those, 183.9 million are fully vaccinated. That's 55.4% of the population. So far, CDC is estimating that 2.78 million people have received a third dose since August 13.

Unger: And we have a situation in New York, which we'll cover at our next segment where some unvaccinated health care workers are under the threat of losing their jobs. We did see, at least the reports this morning, that the pace of vaccinations there did jump considerably and we'll cover that in an upcoming segment. Speaking of unvaccinated, what are the case situations looking like this week?

Garcia: New infections and hospitalizations are declining nationally, though some Northern states continue to see growing outbreaks. The country's averaging more than 2,000 newly reported deaths per day and we're approaching 700,000 total COVID-19 deaths.

Florida, which was regularly identified more than 20,000 infections a day in August, is now averaging around 7,000 cases a day and they're seeing less than half as many COVID-19 patients hospitalized as compared to a month ago. So, that's really good news but we're seeing those cases increased in other parts of the country where Delta is now spreading, so.

Alaska is leading the country in recent cases per capita. They have a rapidly worsening outbreak there that's spreading across both urban and rural areas. And really, they're seeing a strained health care system in that state. Case numbers also continue to climb in portions of the Upper Midwest and New England. So, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Maine, while they didn't see a summer surge, are seeing a surge now.

Unger: Are we seeing the same trends with vaccine hesitant populations that we have? Has anything changed there?

Garcia: So we're finding that the pandemic and mitigation measures, including vaccines, continue to be politicized. As we covered on previous COVID updates, during the early months of the vaccine campaign, we saw lagging shots in Black Americans and Latino Americans and in Republican voters. And early on, we know this could have been equally due to access to the vaccine as to concerns around the vaccine but more recently the racial gap, while it still exists, has really narrowed and the partisan gap remains large. A study that by Pew Research Center found that 86% of Democratic voters have received at least one shot compared to 60% of Republican voters. So that political divide
over vaccination is large and every reliable Blue state now has a higher vaccination rate than almost every reliable Red state. And we know because vaccines are so effective at preventing serious illness, COVID deaths are also showing partisan patterns.

**Unger:** Well, we'll continue to watch those trends and see how they evolve as we encourage people to talk to their physicians, ask questions and hopefully get vaccinated. Mask mandates in schools also continue to be an issue in a lot of areas, but there's now data to support that masking in schools does make a difference. Can you tell us more about that?

**Garcia:** Yeah. So, two new studies were published late last week, looking at the relationship between masking and COVID cases in children. The first looked at the association between K through 12 school mask policies and school-associated COVID outbreaks in two counties in Arizona. After adjusting for variables, the study found that the odds of a school-associated COVID-19 outbreak in schools without a mask requirement worth 3.5 times higher than in those schools with an early mask requirement. I think that really backs up the CDC recommendation which calls for universal indoor masking by students, staff, faculty and visitors in all K through 12 schools, regardless of vaccination status.

**Unger:** Is there another study too, with more data?

**Garcia:** Yeah. So the second study, the CDC assessed differences between county level pediatric COVID-19 cases in schools with and without mask requirements. What they found is that counties without school mask requirements experienced larger increases in pediatric COVID case rates after the start of school, compared with counties that had school mask requirements. So this again suggests that school mask requirements along with other prevention strategies like vaccination and ventilation are critical to reducing the spread of COVID-19 in school.

**Unger:** Mitigation works. Vaccines work. It's very difficult when we have these proven strategies in place but good to see more data supporting it. Speaking of mitigation, are there any other messages that AMA wants us to hear this week?

**Garcia:** So the AMA came out in full support of the CDC directors recommendations to permit Pfizer COVID vaccine boosters for health care professionals. The statement reads, "Given that we are in the midst of a global pandemic that continues to cause widespread illness and death, we must do everything we can to protect our frontline health care professionals. We believe this recommendation is a critical step to preserve our nation's health care capacity and prevent illness among those who've continued to put their own health and safety at risk to care for patients."

**Unger:** Andrea, thanks for being here and giving us that update. We'll be back with another COVID-19 Update next week. In the meantime, for more resources on COVID-19, visit ama-ass.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us, please take care.
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