

# As Omicron wanes, new communications challenges arise for doctors

FEB 2, 2022

**Len Strazewski**

Contributing News Writer

---

Exhausted physicians hope that the Omicron variant-driven surge of COVID-19 cases has indeed peaked in the U.S., sparing lives and somewhat lightening the immense burdens placed on doctors in hospitals, emergency departments, intensive care units and elsewhere.

But the challenges of COVID-19, of course, are far from over for the nation and for America's doctors, according to Leana Wen, MD, MSc. Formerly Baltimore's health commissioner, Dr. Wen is a professor of health policy and management at George Washington University, a medical columnist with *The Washington Post* and a medical analyst for CNN.

The public health communication battle of COVID-19 now rages on, she said, as physicians continue explaining the safety of vaccination, the efficacy of boosters, and navigate future approaches to managing SARS-CoV-2.

Dr. Wen discussed the state of the pandemic and how physicians can rise to meet its continuing public health communication challenges during a recent episode of the "AMA COVID-19 Update."

## Prepare for what's coming

"The biggest failure, and the biggest mistake that still needs to be fixed going forward, is on public health communication," Dr. Wen said, arguing that not enough has been done to stress the highly protective value of vaccine boosters.

About two-thirds of Americans who were eligible for boosters did not get boosters, she noted. Find out what doctors wish patients knew about COVID-19 vaccine boosters.

“And then, the recent guidance on isolation made things so confusing that we, as clinicians, are unable to fully comprehend and then convey it to our patients,” Dr. Wen added. Read more from the AMA about why the nation needs clear advice on COVID-19 isolation.

Dr. Wen urged her physician colleagues to prepare for what happens next in the pandemic.

“As we emerge from Omicron, which we will in the coming weeks, what's next?” she asked. “How are we going to prepare for the next year of this pandemic, knowing that it is very different from the previous couple of years?”

Physicians need to prepare for several different scenarios, she said. “One is the scenario that enough people got infected with Omicron and in combination with vaccination, that maybe we'll have reached herd immunity. Maybe. That's a possible scenario. Another scenario—on the opposite end of the spectrum—is there could be new variants that arise that may even evade the immune protection that we already have.”

But there could be a third scenario, she said. COVID-19 may fall into a seasonal pattern.

“We actually have a very good spring and summer, but then have some resurgence come the fall because immunity will have waned, and more people will be going indoors,” Dr. Wen said. “This is still a winter respiratory virus. I think that is still a possibility as well.”

## Doctors can lead attitude change

“The mentality of Americans needs to change. There are some people who never thought that COVID was real,” Dr. Wen noted. “And there's some people who are still in lockdown despite the fact that they are vaccinated, boosted and pretty well protected and then a lot of people in between.”

Physicians should be on the front lines of communicating changes, she said, explaining that expectations evolve as research evolves. Physicians must put themselves in a position to lead and explain as the research continues.

“There are so many ways to make a difference right now. Look to see what the hospital boards or committees are you could be joining. Could you be changing the way that your medical practice is doing something with their policy? On the local level, can you do something with your school board? Can you testify in front of city council? What about the state legislature? What about working with your local Department of Health?”

“Look to see where your voice can be heard now at the level that you have the most influence and expand from there.”



Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines and variants, and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.” You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.