

COVID-19 Update

December 16: Omicron Update, Monoclonal Antibody Treatment, New Study Shows Vaccinated Healthcare Workers Shed Less Virus, and CDC Holiday Safety Guidelines

Today's issue features an update about the omicron variant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It also includes information from a recent study that finds vaccinated healthcare workers who test positive for COVID-19 shed less virus than those who are unvaccinated, as well as CDC guidelines for safely celebrating the holidays.

OMICRON UPDATE

Based on data from the [CDC](#) and [GISAID global variant tracker](#), 321 cases of the omicron variant have been detected in 37 states, an increase of 646% compared with this time last week. Researchers in South Africa released new details about omicron this week, stating that vaccines seem to provide less protection against the new strain but also saying they still see indications that omicron causes milder symptoms than previous variants.

While additional research is needed, the CDC maintains that vaccines and boosters remain the best public health measure to prevent severe illness and death, slow transmission, and reduce the likelihood of new variants. CDC also recommends that everyone 18 years and older should get a booster shot at least two months after their initial Johnson & Johnson vaccine or six months after completing their primary COVID-19 vaccination series of Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna. People ages 16 and 17 who completed their primary COVID-19 vaccination series of Pfizer at least six months ago are also encouraged to receive a Pfizer booster. Those who are 16 or 17 who received a Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccine are not eligible for a booster at this time.

CDC also reinforces the importance of masks as protection against all variants, and continues to recommend wearing a mask in public indoor settings in areas of substantial or high community transmission, regardless of vaccination status. A recent [study](#) published in the *British Medical Journal* finds that wearing masks can reduce the risk of transmission by 50%, as does hand-washing. Physical distancing reduces transmission risk by 25%.

On December 15, the one-year anniversary of the first COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in Illinois, the Illinois Department of Public Health [announced](#) that more than 18 million doses of vaccine have been given across the state. For more information about patient vaccination and locations, please visit [COVID-19 Vaccines for People Age 12 and Older](#) on nm.org.

For the latest information about omicron and other variants of concern, please visit the [CDC](#) and [WHO](#) websites. For information about travel restrictions related to the omicron variant, visit the [CDC Travel page](#).

NEW STUDY SHOWS VACCINATED HEALTHCARE WORKERS SHED LESS VIRUS

A new study out of University of California, Los Angeles, shows that vaccinated healthcare workers with breakthrough COVID-19 infections shed less virus than those who are unvaccinated and infected.

Researchers analyzed data from 880 UCLA healthcare workers who tested positive for COVID-19 infection prior to the emergence of the delta and omicron variants. Seventy percent of infections were among unvaccinated workers, compared with 30% of those who had received at least one vaccine dose.

More virus was found in samples taken from infected workers who had not yet been vaccinated than in those from infected employees who had received any of three vaccines approved for use in the U.S. Those who had received two doses of an mRNA vaccine had the lowest amount of virus, according to findings.

Researchers conclude that although the dominant variants contain higher amounts of virus, recent data also show that vaccinated individuals still clear infections more quickly and have a more rapid decline in viral loads. The [study](#) was published November 17 in the journal *Open Forum Infectious Diseases*.

CDC HOLIDAY SAFETY GUIDELINES

To help protect you and those around you while celebrating the holidays, CDC offers the following guidelines.

General guidelines

- Protect those not able to be vaccinated, such as young children, by getting yourself and other eligible people around them vaccinated.
- Wear well-fitting masks over your nose and mouth if you are in public indoor settings and you are not fully vaccinated.
- Even those who are fully vaccinated should wear a mask in public indoor settings in communities with substantial to high transmission.
- Outdoors is safer than indoors.
- Avoid crowded, poorly ventilated spaces.
- If you are sick or have symptoms, don't host or attend a gathering.
- Testing can give you information about your risk of spreading COVID-19. Consider using a self-test before joining indoor gatherings with others who are not in your household.

Travel guidelines

If you are considering travel, visit CDC's [Travel page](#) to help you decide what is best for you and your family. CDC still recommends delaying travel until you are fully vaccinated.

- If you are not fully vaccinated and must travel, follow CDC's [domestic travel](#) or [international travel](#) recommendations for unvaccinated people.
- If you will be traveling in a group or family with unvaccinated people, choose safer travel options.
- Everyone, even people who are fully vaccinated, is required to [wear a mask on public transportation](#) and follow [international travel recommendations](#).

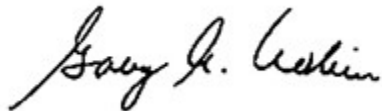
Special considerations

Patients who have a condition or are taking medications that suppress their immune system may not be protected even if they are fully vaccinated and have received an additional dose. They should continue to take all **precautions recommended for unvaccinated people**, including wearing a well-fitted mask.

By working together, we can enjoy safer holidays, travel, and protect our own health as well as the health of our family and friends.

NM continues to experience an increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations across the health system. To help slow the spread of the virus and ensure safe holiday celebrations, please continue to remind patients about the importance of vaccination, booster shots and all appropriate safety measures.

As we continue to navigate the pandemic, I want to take this opportunity to thank each of you for your continued dedication to the communities we serve all across Chicagoland. I am immensely grateful for all you do every day to keep our patients and colleagues safe and healthy. Wishing you and your families the happiest of holidays.



Gary A. Noskin, MD
Senior Vice President, Quality
Northwestern Memorial HealthCare
Chief Medical Officer
Northwestern Memorial Hospital