



May XX, 2024

Mandy Cohen, MD, MPH
Director, Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention
1600 Clifton Rd.
Atlanta, GA 30329

Peter Marks, MD, PhD
Director, Center for Biologics Evaluation
and Research
10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993

Re: Ensuring Continued, Timely Access to COVID-19 Vaccines

Dear Dr. Cohen and Dr. Marks:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations and the millions of Americans we collectively represent and serve, we want to recognize and commend your steadfast leadership and your unwavering commitment to safeguarding and bolstering public health as our country—and the world—continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. As we approach another upcoming respiratory season, we are writing to urge the FDA and CDC to continue to work efficiently and effectively together to ensure that this year, the COVID-19 vaccine is available early in the season. We very much appreciate your ongoing guidance and support and want to work together to ensure increased vaccine access and uptake in communities across the country.

As members of the patient advocacy, provider, medical and healthcare advocacy communities, aging and consumer organizations, we believe it is important to share our first-hand observations from the frontlines of the ongoing battle against COVID-19, which remains the leading cause of death from an infectious disease in the United States.¹ We hope these insights will provide valuable context, particularly as we await recommendations on the selection of vaccine strains announced during the 2024 Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee (VRBPAC) Meeting, which has been rescheduled to June.

For decades, consumers have been urged to get a flu vaccine in the early fall to reduce the risk of severe illness and death. Last year, public health officials extended this guidance to COVID-19 vaccines as well, recommending that consumers receive an updated COVID-19 vaccine in the fall—just like they would for the flu.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/data-research/dashboard/vaccination-trends-adults.html>

However, during the 2023 season, the COVID-19 vaccine was not available in pharmacies and doctors' offices until late September—several weeks later than when flu shots were made readily available. During this time frame (through September 16th), the CDC reported that 83 million flu vaccine doses had been distributed and by the end of September, 15% of adults had received a flu vaccine.² Because of this misalignment, many people who sought the COVID-19 vaccine in late August and early September when they were getting their flu shot, were unable to receive it. We know from the data and from our first-hand experience that many of these individuals likely did not try again to get a vaccine during the 2023 season, and as a result, were left unprotected.³

Uptake for COVID-19 vaccines continue to lag behind flu vaccine rates, despite the fact that those hospitalized with COVID-19 have a 60% higher risk of death compared with those hospitalized for seasonal influenza.⁴ As we continue our collective efforts to safeguard public health and ensure vaccines are available and accessible, it's critical not to overlook the importance of timing. Prioritizing the availability of a COVID-19 vaccine in the late summer/early fall timeframe is essential to optimizing uptake and ensuring more people are vaccinated against the disease.

We appreciate the FDA's diligent work to ensure the selection of a strain that will offer the most protection possible, and we also want to underscore how important it is that the agency—along with the CDC and the COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers—work expeditiously to ensure that the vaccine is available early in the season.

Thank you again for your dedication and continued efforts to protect the health of our communities.

Sincerely,

HealthyWomen
National Hispanic Council on Aging

² <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/fluview/dashboard/vaccination-dashboard.html>

³ <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/vaccine-monitor-november-2023-with-covid-concerns-lagging-most-people-have-not-gotten-latest-vaccine/>

⁴ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2818660>