

# COVID-19: Where We Are Now



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Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, change has been a constant. New information about prevention, treatment, vaccines, and variants is continually emerging, and it can be hard to keep track of it all. Learn more about the most important recent developments below.

## Boosters

While COVID-19 vaccines are working well to prevent severe illness and hospitalization, researchers have started to see reduced protection in some groups, leading to so-called “breakthrough” cases. As a result, the CDC currently recommends that everyone who is eligible get a booster shot. Employers can help encourage employees to get their booster shots by allowing them to take time

off from work for their vaccination appointment and/or to take a sick day to recover if they don't feel well after their boosters. As is the case with all COVID-19 vaccines, people may experience side effects like fatigue, achiness, or fever after receiving their booster.

## The Omicron Variant

The newest variant of the COVID-19 virus, Omicron, is now spreading around the globe. Scientists are racing to understand the variant, and there are still many unknowns. According to the CDC, Omicron appears to be more contagious than previous variants (including Delta) and is likely to cause breakthrough infections in some people who are vaccinated. So far, the data suggests that Omicron infections may be less likely to result in hospitalization and death than previous variants.<sup>1</sup> However, Omicron can still cause serious illness, especially in the elderly, the unvaccinated, and people with underlying conditions. Preventive measures like mask-wearing, social distancing, frequent testing and, of course, vaccines and boosters, will continue to be vitally important in the months ahead.

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## Home Testing

Home COVID-19 rapid tests, which can be purchased over-the-counter at pharmacies and elsewhere, have emerged as an important tool in trying to prevent the spread of the virus. While not foolproof, these tests are reasonably

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<sup>1</sup> [Omicron Cases Are Hitting Highs, But New Data Put End in Sight](#) - Bloomberg, 1/3/22



accurate, especially when symptoms are present. The CDC now recommends that people take home-tests before indoor gatherings, and many people are taking the advice to heart.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, home COVID tests are expensive—around \$25.00 for a pack of two tests—and sometimes difficult to come by, with demand far outstripping supply. The Biden administration plans to distribute millions of free home testing kits in early 2022, and will also make testing kits reimbursable by private insurance.<sup>3</sup> Some state and local governments are stepping up efforts to make home tests more affordable and available as well. In New Hampshire, residents can request free at-home tests by mail<sup>4</sup>, while in Boston, free home tests are being distributed to neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19.

### **The Biden administration plans to distribute millions of free home testing kits in early 2022**

<sup>2</sup> **Self-Testing** - CDC, 12/29/21

<sup>3</sup> **Biden announces free tests and defends the White House response as COVID cases surge** - NPR, 12/21/21

<sup>4</sup> **Free At-Home Rapid COVID-19 Tests Now Available for New Hampshire Residents** - NH Governor Chris Sununu, 11/29/21

## New Travel Requirements

Until recently, travelers entering the US from abroad had to show proof of a negative COVID test within the previous 72 hours. As of December 6, 2021, due to concerns about the Omicron variant travelers now have to show a negative result from a test taken no more than 24 hours before their departure.<sup>5</sup>

## New Treatments on the Way

Lastly, some good news: There have been positive developments in recent weeks when it comes to treatments for COVID-19. A new treatment from Pfizer was recently approved by the FDA and another, from Merck, is on the brink of approval. Both come in the form of pills, to be taken at home for five days after a positive COVID-19 test. In research trials, the Pfizer treatment reduced the risk of hospitalization or death by 85%, and the Merck treatment reduced it by 30%.<sup>6</sup> If these and other treatments become widely available, they could go a long way toward saving lives and reducing the burden on hospitals and health care workers.

**At Tufts Health Plan, we are continually watching and evaluating the latest developments in the COVID-19 pandemic as they relate to the health and wellbeing of our members. If you or your employees have questions about COVID-19 testing, treatment or prevention, please visit our [COVID-19 Resource Center](#).**



<sup>5</sup> [U.S. Enforces Stricter Virus Testing Rules for Travelers](#) – The New York Times, 12/6/21

<sup>6</sup> [Covid Treatments Are Coming](#) – The New York Times, 12/3/21