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VACUNAS (VACCINES) UPDATE

National Alliance for Hispanic Health

U.S. GOVERNMENT RELAUNCHES SENDING FREE AT-HOME COVID-19 TESTS

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has restarted a program that provides free COVID-19 at-home test kits to households through the U.S. Postal Service. Visit covid.gov/tests to order four free COVID-19 at-home tests for your household. It is important to check the expiration dates on the box of home tests as FDA has extended the expiration dates on certain authorized at-home COVID-19 tests. To do this check the name of the manufacturer of the test and the lot number printed on the box against the list of FDA authorized at-home COVID-19 tests to confirm if previously acquired tests have expired or if their expiration dates have been extended. The mailed tests will also include instructions on how to look up extended expiration dates as early reports are that tests are being shipped by DHHS with an expiration date on the box that has passed but are still useable because their expiration date has been extended by the FDA.

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FDA APPROVES UPDATED NOVAVAX COVID-19 VACCINE FOR INDIVIDUALS AGED 12 YEARS AND OLDER

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved Novavax's updated COVID-19 vaccine as another option for individuals aged 12 years and older to protect themselves against severe illness, hospitalization, and death from COVID-19. Similar to updated mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, the updated monovalent Novavax vaccine targets a more recent variant of the Omicron strain called XBB.1.5. This approval allows people 12 years and older the option to receive a protein-based non-mRNA updated COVID-19 vaccine. The CDC has made clear that there is no preferred updated 2023-2024 COVID-19 vaccines. The CDC definition of up-to-date for COVID-19 vaccination is available by clicking here and may be updated as CDC monitors data.

TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES ACCESSING UPDATED COVID-19 VACCINES

As the COVID-19 vaccine distribution transitions to the commercial market, some individuals looking to get the updated COVID-19 vaccine are experiencing uncertainty over insurance coverage and cancelled appointments due to supply delays. Health officials note that Medicare Part B and Medicaid will continue to cover the COVID-19 vaccine without cost sharing and coverage for individuals with private health insurance should be immediate. Individuals should call their insurance companies if they experience issues with coverage or are asked to pay for the updated COVID-19 vaccine out of pocket. It is recommended that insured persons check with their selected vaccine site or insurer to confirm whether the vaccine site is in the insurer's network. Uninsured adults will have access to free updated COVID-19 vaccines through the Bridge Access Program for COVID-19 Vaccines and Treatments. People whose health insurance charges copays or other cost sharing for COVID-19 vaccines can obtain free vaccines by going to an in-network vaccine provider that is also participating in the Bridge Access program. If individuals are experiencing problems finding an updated COVID-19 vaccine, they can visit www.vaccines.gov to find the closest location offering the vaccine at no cost in their area and make an appointment. If there is nothing available at that time, they should check the web site later on to see if additional locations have been added, or contact their health care provider or local health department. Visit www.vacunashelp.org for more information or call the Alliance's bilingual Su Familia Helpline at 1-866-783-2645.

AGREEMENT REACHED BETWEEN PFIZER AND DHHS TO PROVIDE PAXLOVID FREE THROUGH 2023

DHHS has announced that an agreement has been reached with Pfizer, the manufacturer of Paxlovid, to provide the medication for treatment of COVID-19 for free through the end of this year for Medicare and Medicaid patients and for uninsured persons through a patient assistance program using DHHS procured Paxlovid. However, with the transition of Paxlovid from being provided free by the government to the commercial market, many persons with health insurance will be charged a copay for Paxlovid. In response to criticism that Pfizer will be significantly increasing the cost of Paxlovid, Pfizer has announced after 2023 it will continue to run a copay assistance program and patient assistance for underinsured and uninsured persons through 2028. The patient assistance program can be accessed through 1-844-989-PATH (7284) or pfizerrxpathways.com.

OLDER ADULTS ARE AT HIGHER RISK OF SEVERE ILLNESS FROM COVID-19

According to data from the CDC, adults aged 65 and older accounted for 62.9% of all COVID-19-associated hospitalizations between January and August 2023 in the United States. Data from 13 states indicate that nearly all adults aged 65 and older who were hospitalized (98.5%) had at least one underlying chronic condition and 90.3% had two or more underlying conditions such as diabetes, chronic heart disease, or kidney disorders. The national data also showed that only 43.3% of older adults had received the updated COVID-19 bivalent booster previously recommended by the CDC between September 2022 and May 2023. Health officials stress that these data show that older adults remain at a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and highlight the importance of staying up to date with their COVID-19 vaccination.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR AGING AND CDC DIRECTOR VISIT VIDA SENIOR HEALTH CENTER IN WASHINGTON, DC TO EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF VACCINATION FOR OLDER ADULTS

Ahead of respiratory health season, CDC Director Mandy Cohen, MD, MPH and Assistant Secretary for Aging Alison Barkoff visited VIDA Senior Health Center in Washington, DC to highlight the importance of vaccination, especially for older adults who are at higher risk for severe disease from COVID-19, flu, and RSV. They emphasized the need to reach out to individuals who are the highest risk in our communities and work together to encourage vaccination for all three viruses. Secretary Barkoff noted that the Administration for Community Living (ACL) has networks across the country in every community that can help both older adults and individuals with disabilities find a vaccine, get transportation to a vaccine site, or receive in-home vaccinations. Visit www.acl.gov for more information and resources.

CDC RECOMMENDS FIRST VACCINE FOR PREGNANT INDIVIDUALS TO PROTECT INFANTS AGAINST RSV

The CDC has endorsed the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices' (ACIP) recommendation for use of Abrysvo, the first respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccine for use in pregnant individuals to protect infants from birth through 6 months of age. The CDC recommends seasonal administration of one dose of the RSV vaccine for pregnant individuals during weeks 32 through 36 of pregnancy. The RSV season is typically September through January in most parts of the U.S. ACIP also voted to include Abrysvo in the Vaccines for Children program, which will provide this vaccination free-of-charge to pregnant individuals under 19 years of age who are uninsured, underinsured, Medicaid-eligible, or American Indian or Alaska Native.

RSV is a contagious respiratory virus that causes infections of the lungs and breathing passages. Although most children infected with RSV will experience mild cases, RSV is the number one reason for child hospitalizations in the U.S. Abrysvo has been shown to reduce the risk of RSV hospitalization for infants by 57 percent in the first six months after birth.

There are now two options to protect infants against RSV, including a recently approved antibody shot for all infants under 8 months, as well as some older babies at increased risk of severe illness. All infants younger than 8 months are now recommended to receive either the antibody shot before or during their first RSV season or be protected against RSV through the maternal RSV vaccine. Most infants will likely only need protection from either the maternal RSV vaccine or antibody shot, but not both. Pregnant individuals whose infants are born outside of RSV season will not receive the maternal RSV vaccine. Instead, infants born outside RSV season should receive the antibody shot immediately before or during RSV season. Pregnant individuals whose infants are born during RSV season should be informed on both options for protection of their infant. As respiratory health season approaches, pregnant people and parents should talk with their healthcare providers about how to protect their infants against serious RSV illness.

RECENT STUDY SHOWS POTENTIAL BIOMARKERS FOR LONG COVID

A study published in the journal Nature analyzed blood samples of 268 individuals who either fully recovered from a COVID-19 diagnosis, had never been infected from COVID-19, or exhibited ongoing long COVID symptoms at least four months after their COVID-19 infection.

Researchers identified several differences in the blood of individuals experiencing long COVID symptoms compared to the other groups. Individuals with long COVID exhibited irregular T cell and B cell activity, which are immune system cells that help fight off infection. These individuals were also likely to have significantly lower levels of a hormone called cortisol, which helps with alertness and other important bodily functions such as regulating blood sugar, metabolism, and stress response. These low cortisol levels could explain why many individuals suffering from long COVID experience extreme fatigue.

Health experts note these findings are a key first step in the development of a test to diagnose this chronic condition affecting an estimated 7.7 million to 23 million individuals in the U.S, and could offer researchers a way to objectively test experimental treatments for long COVID.

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