



# SAFER

## New COVID-19 Vaccines: Fall 2023 Employer Update

In light of the emergence of new variants, increasing rates of infection and hospitalization, and the concurrent threat of various respiratory illnesses, it is **recommended all individuals** aged six months and older receive a new COVID-19 vaccine. This recommendation is driven by two key factors: the natural decline of immunity to the virus over time, and the ongoing evolution of the virus which may lead to the potential bypassing of existing immunity.

While a significant portion of the American population possesses some level of immunity against the COVID-19 virus, whether through vaccination, prior infection or a combination of both, it is important to note the latest vaccine has been specifically designed to target the Omicron variant XBB.1.5. This variant was the dominant strain earlier in the year, and data suggests the updated vaccines have been shown effective at **protecting against the currently circulating variants**.

Unlike some prior COVID-19 vaccines that required two doses for full vaccination status, individuals are now considered **up-to-date** after only one dose of the updated COVID-19 vaccine, regardless of whether they have received previous primary vaccine doses or boosters.

The new vaccine is accessible to the majority of Americans at no cost, **irrespective of their insurance status**. This can be through insurance coverage or the **Bridge Access Program** initiated by the CDC for uninsured people. However, it's essential to highlight that even when vaccines are covered without charge, *SAFER* surveys have found certain groups still encounter obstacles to vaccination.<sup>1</sup> These groups include individuals with disabilities, foreign-born residents and those residing in rural areas. Some respondents, especially those facing difficulties in accessing health care due to citizenship or residency status, mistakenly believed

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<sup>1</sup> See [A Year in Review, and What's Next](#) for more information about survey results, vaccination access, and employer vaccine policies

there might be an out-of-pocket cost associated with obtaining the vaccine. At that time, on-site vaccination offered by employers was widely seen by these respondents as the most effective means to ensure access. Other employer interventions, such as providing paid time off for vaccine appointments and disseminating information about the vaccine, were also linked to notably higher vaccination rates compared to those whose employers did not communicate or implement policies related to vaccine access.

By encouraging workers to get the updated vaccine, employers can play a crucial role in minimizing the risk of infection and severe illness both at work and in the wider community.

### Recommendations for Employers:

1. Provide up-to-date information about the new COVID-19 vaccine to workers – this [CDC website provides information](#) in English and Spanish
  - a. Instead of relying on generic information about the COVID-19 vaccine or boosters, provide specific information about why this [new vaccine](#) provides a higher level of protection, and how it is [not just another “booster”](#)
  - b. Encourage workers who may be unsure about whether they should get the vaccine to speak with their medical provider to help evaluate their personal risk factors, including the risk of other individuals in their household surrounding COVID-19 illness and vaccination
  - c. Make information available in the primary language(s) spoken by your workforce
  - d. Provide information about other vaccinations individuals may want to receive this season – for example, the flu vaccine is recommended for everyone aged six months and older, and the R.S.V. vaccine for everyone 60 and older, in consultation with a health care provider
2. Facilitate easier vaccine access for those who want to get vaccinated
  - a. Provide information about vaccination appointments and [locations](#)
  - b. Ensure workers are aware the vaccine carries no out-of-pocket cost, either through insurance or federal initiatives
  - c. Consider policies such as paid time off for vaccine appointments and recovery, on-site vaccination or other policies to increase access
3. Consider modest incentives
  - a. Offering prizes or rewards to individuals who receive the vaccine can potentially encourage a quicker adoption, especially in anticipation of potential case surges during the fall and winter seasons
  - b. If you choose to implement incentives, make sure to do so without discrimination and maintain individuals' privacy regarding their vaccination status – avoid publicly awarding prizes to teams with the highest vaccination rates, as this could promote peer pressure and compromise personal privacy, and also refrain from singling out specific groups of workers for recognition
4. Provide information about obtaining tests
  - a. As of Sept. 25, 2023, residential households may once again receive four rapid antigen tests, free of charge, at <https://www.covid.gov/tests>
  - b. No-cost COVID-19 testing is available to those who are insured and can be [located through the CDC website](#)