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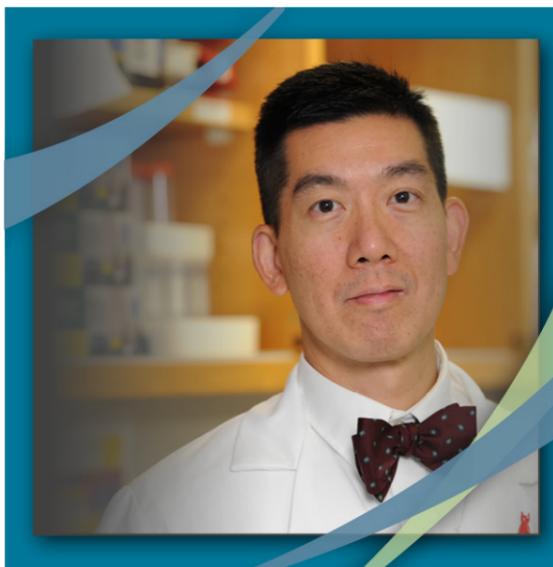
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UMSOM COVID-19 Expert: Booster Vaccine Best Way to Protect Against Variants

December 08, 2021 | Joanne Morrison

Chen says vaccination remains key to protecting yourself and others from infection, reiterates the importance of mask wearing, physical distancing, and testing as holiday gatherings approach.



Booster shots are the best way to protect yourself and others from serious COVID-19 infection, particularly as new variants such as Omicron emerge, according to Wilbur Chen, MD, MS, professor of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine (UMSOM) and an adult infectious disease expert in the school's Center for Vaccine Development and Global Health (CVD).

Chen, who serves as an advisor to Gov. Larry Hogan, an advisor to the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) COVID-19 response team, and a member of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, said this is the best way to protect individuals, co-workers, and family members.

"Completing your primary series with an authorized COVID-19 vaccine remains the best way to protect yourself against the virus and its variants," Chen said. "If it's been six months since your primary series, then your immunity may have declined significantly, so we recommend that you complete your booster dose."

Chen's comments come amid concerns of rising COVID-19 cases and uncertainties over the Omicron variant. Vaccine manufacturers including Pfizer and BioNTech this week announced preliminary results showing that the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine neutralizes the Omicron variant after three doses. "The booster dose is intended to continue to provide you with the best protection against this pandemic. Do it to also protect your friends, family, and neighbors," Chen said.

He further cautioned that there are other safeguards that should be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other illnesses, such as the flu.

"Vaccines do not work alone. Everyone should continue to wear a well-fitting mask when in public spaces with other persons nearby," Chen said, adding that testing also is critical to reducing the spread of illness, as is staying home and away from work or school.

"If you think you may have been exposed to a person with the infection, you should try to get tested," Chen said. "Meanwhile, if you feel ill or think you had an exposure to the infection, you should remain at home and not spread the infection to others."

Planning for the Holiday Season

States across the country, including Maryland, have seen a rise in COVID-19 cases following the Thanksgiving holiday. Chen and other top infectious disease experts caution that safeguards need to be in place to fight the virus, primarily ensuring that those who are eligible get vaccinated.

"Everyone is looking forward to spending precious time with friends and family during the coming holidays. Making sure that everyone who is eligible to be vaccinated and boosted has completed this before gatherings will be very important," Chen said. "When planning indoor gatherings, make sure to create a safe environment by providing good ventilation of the air. People should remain masked as much as possible if they have not been fully vaccinated."

Chen also recommends having a plan for negative testing in place as another effective way to reduce the risk of infections during the holidays. There are two types of tests. Viral testing is commonly in the form of a rapid test and can confirm if there is active COVID-19 infection. The CDC asserts that these COVID-19 rapid self-tests are one of many key risk-reducing measures, along with vaccination, mask wearing, and physical distancing, that can help to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The other form of testing, the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test for COVID-19, is a molecular test that analyzes an individual's upper-respiratory specimen, looking for genetic material (ribonucleic acid or RNA) of SARS-CoV-2. This laboratory-conducted PCR test has been considered the gold standard for diagnosing COVID-19 since it was authorized for use in February 2020.

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**Students,
faculty, and staff,
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heard!**

Submit Your Story.

At present, any individual 18 and older who is fully vaccinated is eligible to receive a booster shot. More details about eligibility can be found on the [CDC's website](#). To maintain a safe working environment at UMB, officials and infectious disease experts are encouraging individuals to get the COVID-19 booster shot. For information about vaccination sites and other COVID-19 resources, visit the [UMB COVID-19 Recovery website](#).

Your Chance to Influence and Inspire Others

At UMB, your thoughts and experiences matter. We need your help to encourage others who are eligible to complete their COVID-19 vaccine series and get the booster shot. Share your story about why receiving the vaccine booster is important to you.

Tell Us Why You Got the COVID-19 Vaccine Booster and take this opportunity to showcase your story and inspire others on campus. Over the next few months, UMB will be highlighting members of the community and their vaccine booster experience.

Share your experience getting the COVID-19 vaccine/booster by tagging us @umbaltimore and using #UMBVaccinesWork on Twitter or Instagram. Include why you got the vaccine.

You also can submit your photos and comments about your vaccine experience by visiting www.umaryland.edu/cpa/digital-marketing-and-social-media/umbvaccineswork/.

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