



In the News

Most Nursing Home Staff, Residents Not Up to Date with COVID-19 Vaccinations

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As the US was entering the 2022 holiday season—a time when public health experts anticipated a spike in cases of COVID-19—most nursing home residents and staff members were not up to date with their vaccinations against the disease, according to a new [report](#) by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF).

This finding is concerning, the authors said, because even though the current rates of COVID-19 deaths among nursing facility residents and staff remain relatively low, history suggests that a spike in infections is likely to occur following the 2022 holiday season. Death rates surged immediately following the 2021 holiday season, from 35 deaths per 100 000 in mid-November 2021 to 131 deaths per 100 000 in mid-January 2022.

"That spike raises concerns about the potential for a similar spike in preventable deaths among nursing home residents in the upcoming post-holiday season," the authors noted. "Keeping nursing facility residents and staff current on their vaccines is an important tool for reducing deaths from COVID-19 and especially important this holiday season when risks may be compounded by high rates of other respiratory viruses."

Preliminary data support [predictions](#) by public experts that the US will experience higher-than-usual cases of influenza, respiratory syncytial virus, and COVID-19, reducing hospital capacity to care for patients. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [noted](#) in its weekly US influenza surveillance report on December 9 that at least 13 million cases, 120 000 hospitalizations, and 7300 deaths from influenza have occurred so far this season, the highest levels of flu hospitalizations at this time of year since the 2010-2011 flu season. Similarly, [recent CDC data](#) for nursing home residents and staff show increases in COVID-19 cases and deaths following Thanksgiving.

The KFF authors analyzed data on vaccination rates of nursing facility residents and staff members in the 14 400 nursing facilities that reported such data (out of 15 200 total). In their analysis, they found that as of November 20, fewer than half (45%) of all nursing facility residents and fewer than a one-quarter of staff (22%) were up to date with their COVID-19 vaccinations, defined by the CDC as "having received a bivalent booster or having received a final shot of the original vaccines less than 2 months ago."

The share of residents who were up to date ranged from 73% in South Dakota to 24% in Arizona. Among staff, the share ranged from 48% in California to 10% in Alabama. These lagging rates are worrisome because people in nursing facilities are at higher risk of having worse outcomes if infected with COVID-19. One-fifth of all US COVID-19 deaths have occurred among residents and staff in long-term care facilities.

These figures represent a sharp decrease from the 87% of nursing home residents and staff who completed their primary vaccination series. The report says that federal vaccine clinics and vaccine mandates for health care workers contributed to high initial vaccination rates among nursing facility residents and staff, but in the absence of ongoing federal initiatives, fewer people may stay up to date with their vaccines.

Several factors contributed to the high take-up rate of the primary COVID-19 vaccine series, the authors note, including the high death rates among nursing facility residents before vaccines became available, the focus on this population once vaccines became available, and the presence of 3 on-site vaccination clinics held at all long-term care facilities participating in the [Federal Pharmacy](#)

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[Partnership for Long-Term Care Program](#). Although such facilities can still request additional clinics, "it's unclear how many facilities are doing so or how many pharmacy partners continue to participate," the report says.

In addition, initial uptake of the vaccines was low among US nursing home employees until the Biden administration [announced a COVID-19 vaccination mandate](#) in August 2021 for staff working in facilities receiving Medicare and Medicaid funding. According to an [analysis](#) by KFF researchers released in May 2022, COVID-19 vaccination rates among nursing home staff increased by 25 percentage points nationally (63% to 88%) from the announcement of the mandate in August 2021 to after vaccination deadlines passed in March 2022. Despite concerns that the mandate might induce nursing home workers to quit or be fired for noncompliance, the KFF researchers and [other investigators](#) found that the requirement did not appear to have worsened staffing shortages.

The Biden administration began encouraging the US public to get their COVID-19 boosters before the 2022 holiday season, but take-up of boosters has been lower when compared with the primary vaccination series, the new Kaiser report noted. On November 22, the administration [announced](#) it was launching a 6-week campaign through the end of the year urging the US public to get their updated COVID-19 vaccine, focusing on reaching seniors and the communities that were hardest hit by COVID-19.

As part of this initiative, the Department of Health and Human Services is taking steps to expand beyond the 70 000 locations that had been offering the updated COVID-19 vaccines, including mobile settings and sites in rural and remote areas. The effort also involves engaging the health care workforce to highlight COVID-19 vaccinations and treatment for older populations. For example, a [coalition](#) of the nation's leading medical societies encouraged their members to use their interactions with patients as opportunities to make strong recommendations for COVID-19 vaccination (and, where feasible, to provide vaccination), as well as to educate and answer questions about prevention and treatment options.

The effort also involves new enforcement guidance from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) to ensure that nursing homes are offering updated COVID-19 vaccines and timely treatment to their residents and staff. The Biden administration said that the agency will stress in its guidance that nursing homes with low vaccination rates will be referred to state survey agencies for close scrutiny; facilities that do not meet the requirement to offer and educate residents and staff about the benefit of COVID-19 vaccinations will face enforcement actions, including being required to submit action plans outlining steps they will take to achieve compliance.

In addition, the initiative called for the Department of Health and Human Services to ask governors to help with boosting COVID vaccination rates for long-term care residents and highlight for them how their states are performing compared with others. It also said that CMS will provide data to states and health plans about the poorest-performing nursing homes to help them promote increased vaccination in those settings.

"Creating new opportunities for on-site vaccinations and updating the health care worker vaccination mandate to reflect current CDC guidance could increase the number of nursing facility residents and staff who are up-to-date with their COVID-19 vaccinations and decrease preventable deaths," the KFF authors said.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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