

OHS Spotlight with Barb Stevens – 03.18.2021

March marks the one-year anniversary since the world declared COVID-19 a pandemic. At the time, cases in the U.S. were few. Today, more than 535,000 people have lost their lives to COVID-19 and nearly 30 million people have been infected in the United States alone. Three vaccines approved for emergency authorization by the Food and Drug Administration offer hope, with more than 100 million vaccine doses administered. **Barb Stevens**, Exelon Director of Occupational Health Services (OHS), answers questions about vaccine safety and the importance of getting vaccinated and staying vigilant.

Q. Why do some counties have more vaccines than others? When do you think vaccines will be more widely available to the general public?

A. Each state is determining the vaccine allotment for its counties, and the amount may be based on factors such as county population, demographics and pace of vaccine administration. Demographic factors may include number of health care facilities, nursing homes and other large facilities located within a county's geographical area. Additionally, there could be some variances in the phases of a county. But now we have three vaccines in the United States, and each manufacturer is dedicated to significantly increasing production of our supply of the vaccine.

Vaccines have become more available in just the last week to 10 days and the promise is enough vaccine by May for every adult in the United States who wishes to be vaccinated. I am confident supply will catch up with demand, and we anticipate that all adults who would like to be vaccinated will be able to do so no later than mid-summer.

Q. Getting an appointment seems to be impossible. What do you recommend for getting an appointment? Should I go online? Should I call my doctor?

A. I would do both. Register with your local county health department and all pharmacies, including those in supermarkets (e.g., Kroger) and retailers (e.g., Walmart), that are performing vaccinations in your area. Additionally, I would spend a little time online searching Covid-19 vaccinations in your area. The county health departments may also have links to facilities providing vaccinations, including their own vaccination clinics.

The pharmacies only allow you to register for an open appointment time, so if you don't get one today, visit the website repeatedly and look for open availability. Also, be willing to drive a little farther than you normally would and look at pharmacies that you might not do normal business with. If you have a chronic health problem, be sure to stay in touch with your physician. Most importantly, don't give up. Vaccination appointments are becoming easier to get, as more vaccine is being produced and distributed.

Q. How safe do you think the vaccines are? Some feel like they were developed too quickly.

A. I believe the vaccines are safe. Many resources (scientists, researchers, and reputable agencies) worked together in a worldwide effort to deliver a vaccine to market. Additionally, the mRNA vaccines, the technology Pfizer and Moderna used, have been around for a couple of decades, which

eliminated a lot of the pre-work that must go into vaccine production. The clinical trials were large with many thousands of people participating, which resulted in strong, reliable data.

Q. What advice do you give to individuals who are hesitant about getting the vaccine?

- A.** First, I am thankful to live in a country where we can do our own scientific research, develop vaccines and manufacture them at record pace to help us end the pandemic. I would encourage our employees to trust the CDC and healthcare specialists who are recommending people get vaccinated. If you have questions about the vaccine, please make sure to reach out to a credible, trustworthy source, such as your healthcare provider, for answers or check out our [Vax Scene employee site](#).

Many people believe that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine is new “science,” but the mRNA technology has been around for a couple of decades. There also has been a lot of work done historically to create a vaccine for coronaviruses. Just to be clear, the mRNA vaccines cannot change your DNA. While it does enter into a cell, it does not enter the nucleus of the cell. Finally, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine uses an older technology, which has been previously tested and used in other types of vaccines.

Q. Does the vaccine mean life will immediately return to normal?

- A.** We all want to return to normal and vaccinations are a way to do that, but it will take some time. It’s the nature of a virus to circulate and to mutate.

The science is indicating this virus will be endemic and will continue to circulate, which makes it all the more important for us to control the virus instead of it controlling us. Getting vaccinated and following the guidelines from our public health experts are critical to ending the pandemic. Even after we get vaccinated, we still need to take precaution by wearing masks and social distancing at all times except in the limited circumstances outlined by the recent CDC [guidance](#). And, as more people are vaccinated, and we reach herd immunity, we anticipate we will be able to further relax the PPE requirements, including mask wearing. But we can’t let our guard down yet. Together we can end this.

As a reminder, vaccine distribution information continues to evolve rapidly, so do check out the [Vax Scene webpage](#) and [CDC site](#) for updates or discuss with your health care provider.