



FAMILY HEALTHCARE OF FAIRFAX, PC

## SHOULD YOU TAKE A FOURTH SHOT?

Dear Patients,

Our last brief newsletter addressed the recent FDA announcement about boosters. Many of you have questions and we feel it is important to add some clarification to help you make decisions about taking a fourth shot. Those with immune deficiency have previously been offered a second booster and we believe all patients in our practice who are eligible for this have received it already.



**The situation now:** The incidence of Covid in the US is currently at a low mark and most of us have relaxed a bit since Omicron receded. We had hoped this pause in the pandemic would be a longer one, but it seems that the Omicron ba-2 variant is causing a new surge in Europe and also in countries that have previously been spared from major outbreaks. In December/January, the surge due to Omicron happened almost simultaneously in the US and Europe but while US cases are now predominantly ba-2, we are only seeing a small rise in cases in a few states - NY, TX, FL and CA.

**What may be ahead:** It is hard to say whether the US will have a large surge, but we will likely follow the pattern of previous global surges. If a surge happens, it will be obvious 1 to 3 weeks from now. Perhaps the huge Omicron surge in December has provided the majority of Americans with natural immunity and this may protect us to a certain extent and delay the expected surge. But keep in mind that most of us in the medical community have long stopped focusing on case counts and are paying more attention to hospitalizations. Fortunately, the ba-2 variant appears to cause less serious illness.

**Who should consider getting the fourth shot:** People with high-risk conditions, including immune deficiency, active cancer treatment, treatment with immune modulators, serious medical issues, and those over 65 should seriously consider getting a booster over the next few weeks. If the ba-2 variant proves to cause high hospitalization rates and deaths - which we do not expect to happen - more people should consider the jab.

If you're not in a high-risk category, it is also reasonable to wait, adjust your activities appropriately and get the shot when you feel it is important for you. Keep in mind that vaccine protection is not immediate, but very good within two weeks. If you delay getting the shot until case counts are high, just be extra careful in your activities and exposures until the vaccine is optimally effective. Also keep in mind that we have begun treating some of our Covid positive patients with the new Pfizer pill, Paxlovid, and it is effective and supply is adequate in our area.

In addition, it is probably true that the majority of Americans got natural immunity from Omicron exposure over the last few months, and we can reasonably expect their immunity is better than that offered by the current mRNA vaccines which were developed against the original Alpha variant. If you had Covid in the last 4 to 6 months and are healthy, there is no urgency to get a booster.

**Other considerations regarding the fourth shot:** We acknowledge that acceptance of booster shots here in the US is low. Only 1/3 of eligible people have taken a third shot and it is reasonable to expect that the fourth shot will be declined by an even higher percentage. I make no value judgement here; it is just reality. Objections to the fourth shot are many and for most healthy young people, probably reasonable considering the risk vs. benefit of the vaccine, especially when case counts are low. My main concern about boosters is for young men, ages 13 to 35, who have a real risk of myocarditis from the vaccine which is now known to increase with second and third shots.

**Bottom line:** Nobody needs to panic with the news about the ba-2 variant. Assess your personal risk and use your judgement to decide what is best for you regarding the fourth shot. As you can probably imagine, Cathy and I cannot answer everyone's concerns about getting boosters but if you still have questions after reading this, please schedule a virtual visit to discuss your situation.

On a personal note, thank you to all who have offered support to me and the Ukrainian people. My sincere gratitude to those who have sent contributions and who have expressed solidarity with the victims of the war. We have started seeing refugees in our office and expect more to come soon. There may be opportunities for you to help locally and I promise to keep you informed.

Stay safe and well,

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