

COVID-19 Health System Updates

December 23, 2020, Wednesday

When it comes to COVID-19 vaccination, we have never done anything like this before. Our experience with the annual flu vaccine is different, because flu vaccine is generally not in short supply. And while we've had plenty of experience in quickly mobilizing to set up new types of operations and services, the vaccination project is unique in its complexity.

Without question, our goal is to offer COVID-19 vaccination as soon as possible to all of our Mount Sinai Health System family. That family includes our faculty, employed and voluntary, our staff, our trainees, and our students. We have teams of your colleagues working literally around the clock to help make this possible as quickly as our vaccine arrivals allow. Thanks to increased vaccine availability, we have been able to expand the list of people being offered vaccine, and we will keep doing that as vaccine keeps rolling in.

We wish we could vaccinate everyone who wants the vaccine today—but there are a host of limitations and a lot of moving parts which limit that from being possible. Who gets offered the vaccine in what order is based on guidance from the New York State Department of Health. Manufacturing constraints limit how much vaccine we can get at any one time, and therefore how quickly we can work our way through that ordered list of recipients. And we also must find enough people to staff the vaccination pods without taking critical resources away from patient care.

Additionally, each health system has some differences in their prioritization plan based on interpretation of that New York State DOH guidance—and that creates frustration if you see colleagues in other health systems getting vaccinated ahead of you. And it creates frustration for some in those other health systems when they see some of their colleagues in our health system being vaccinated ahead of them. We understand these frustrations, and also are pleased that so many of you understand the importance of getting vaccinated and that it is safe. We also believe that the best remedy to these

concerns is to continue to receive vaccine allocations and accomplish the challenging task of vaccinating more and more of our Mount Sinai family in the weeks ahead.

As you may recall from previous emails, we are using a “zone” approach to offer vaccine to any employee, regardless of job title, based on the time they spend in a particular part of the hospital, such as an ICU, and on that zone’s exposure to COVID-19 patients. We believe this is the most equitable way to treat our front-line teams. Within each zone, we are going in random order to make sure that no area is left uncovered while people are being vaccinated.

In the meantime, we urge you to keep one very important thing in mind: PPE works. COVID-19 has been with us for nearly a year, and we know how to keep ourselves safe while we wait for our opportunity to receive the vaccine.

You are going to be offered a vaccine, I promise. And until you are, you are going to be protected as long as you wear your PPE correctly, and observe masking, social distancing, and hand hygiene when you’re on break or not at work.

As of this morning, we had 347 COVID-19-positive inpatients in our hospitals, 44 of whom were in critical care. The New York State seven-day average test positivity rates as of yesterday were 4.3 percent for New York City, 6.5 percent for Long Island, and 6.3 percent for the Mid-Hudson region.

Travel Policy Reminder

As a reminder, if you are traveling outside New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut over the holidays, you must enter your plans into the [Mount Sinai Health System Travel Registry](#) before departure.

The Truth About Vaccine Myths

There are a lot of myths and false stories going around about the COVID-19 vaccines. In addition to our own [public](#) and [employee](#) vaccine websites, Mount Sinai is working with a company called NewsGuard to provide factual information. If you or a member of your team have heard something about the vaccines that seems hard to believe, you can visit NewsGuard’s [report on the top COVID-19 vaccine myths](#) to learn the truth.

Meet Our COVID-19 Scientists

The COVID-19 vaccines developed by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna are “extraordinary.” That is the assessment of Peter Palese, PhD, the Horace W. Goldsmith Professor and Chair of the Department of Microbiology, and a world leader in vaccinology. With their recent Emergency Use Authorizations by the FDA, these are the first approved vaccines to use messenger RNA (mRNA) technology, which works like a software program that prompts the body to create antibodies against the virus. The technology is considered particularly safe since mRNA does not enter the cell nucleus, where a human’s genetic material, or DNA, is kept. It breaks down and leaves the body quickly.

“Every single one of the clinical trial participants who received the Pfizer vaccine is thought to have made antibodies against SARS-CoV-2,” which causes COVID-19, and even the 5 percent of the participants who did not make enough antibodies to be fully protected made enough to be partially protected against severe disease, Dr. Palese says. “That is success, and that is why everyone is so excited. I hope everyone who is eligible gets vaccinated.”

Dr. Palese expects that traditional vaccines, using an inactivated virus or a vectored approach to create an immune response in humans, will not be far behind those based on mRNA. Such vaccines might be cheaper to make and store, and be suitable for children and infants, who were not part of the mRNA vaccine trials. He and his renowned colleagues Adolfo García-Sastre, PhD, and Florian Krammer, PhD, are working on a COVID-19 vaccine that uses an engineered Newcastle delivery system. They expect to begin a phase 1 safety trial in January. Read more [here](#).

Songs for Mount Sinai

You may remember Songs for Mount Sinai, an effort from Broadway performers and performance artists who gathered each week back in the spring to share songs and messages of support as a tribute to you all. Just in time for the holidays, and because our appreciation for you is unending, all 64 performances have now been pulled together into the digital equivalent of a boxed set. They can be enjoyed at [this link](#).

It's a tough time for everyone right now. We want to spend time with our extended family and friends for the holidays, but we can't, because it's not safe to travel or gather with people from different households right now, or because we have too much work to do to take care of our COVID-19 patients and vaccinate our staff. And the promise of the new vaccines mixed with the reality of the current increase in COVID-19 in our region has many of us struggling with a complex set of emotions. That's a completely normal reaction. I sincerely hope you will find some time to relax with your loved ones, and use our [wellness resources](#) if you can.

Lastly, please remember: Better times are coming. Vaccines are here, and more are coming. And the end of this pandemic, even if it's not here yet, is coming too.

Merry Christmas to those who celebrate, and a happy New Year to all.

Vicki R. LoPachin, MD, MBA
Senior Vice President
Chief Medical Officer
Mount Sinai Health System