Information updated on October 4, 2023

With the pandemic in its fourth year, staying informed about the latest developments with the disease, including new variants and treatments, remains especially important for older adults, who are most at risk for severe illness and death from COVID-19.

Here's a summary of recent coronavirus news followed by answers to some of the most frequently asked questions about COVID-19.

Latest COVID-19 news

Novavax's updated vaccine gets green light from FDA (Oct. 4).
The Food and Drug Administration authorized Novavax's updated COVID-19 vaccine on Oct. 3 for people 12 and older. Similar to the revised vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, Novavax's protein-based vaccine targets XBB.1.5, a more recent version of the coronavirus. The company said in a news release that the new shot will be available in thousands of locations across the U.S. in the coming days.

Americans can once again order free COVID tests from the government (Sept. 26).
Each U.S. household can now order four at-home COVID-19 tests from the website covidtests.gov free of charge. Shipping for the rapid tests is also free. The tests being distributed can detect the variants currently circulating, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services confirmed, and they are expected to remain effective through the end of the year.

Late summer surge starts to cool off, but COVID deaths are still climbing (Sept. 26).
After several weeks of increasing COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations, trends are starting to slow, new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows. Deaths from COVID-19, however, continue to climb, and adults ages 75 and older continue to have the highest death rate, compared to younger age groups.

New COVID-19 vaccines get the green light (Sept. 12).
A new batch of COVID-19 vaccines that are a closer match to many of the coronavirus variants that are currently circulating throughout the U.S. have been approved and recommended by health officials and are now available in many pharmacies and doctors' offices across the country. The shots, from Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech, target the XBB.1.5 strain of omicron. While this variant is no longer driving the majority of the country's infections, its close relatives are, and experts say the vaccines should provide good protection against them. It's recommended that individuals 6 months and older get the new vaccine ahead of the fall and winter virus season. Uninsured and underinsured individuals will be able to receive the vaccines for free under the CDC's new bridge access program.

How Can You Catch COVID-19?
COVID-19 is the name of the disease caused by a coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. You can catch COVID-19 by breathing in air if you are close to an infected person who is exhaling small droplets and particles that contain the virus. You can get it if those small droplets and particles land in your eyes, nose or mouth (likely through coughs or sneezes) or if you have virus particles on your hands and touch your eyes, nose or mouth.

Who Is at Risk for COVID-19?
Anyone can get COVID-19, but some people are more at risk for what experts call "severe disease," at which time hospitalization or intensive care may be required. Older adults are more likely than younger, healthier people to experience serious illness from COVID-19. The vast majority of COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. have occurred among people 50 or older and the risk increases with age.

Adults of any age with an underlying medical condition are at increased risk for complications from a coronavirus infection. Among the factors:

- Cancer
- Chronic kidney disease
- Chronic lung diseases, including COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), asthma (moderate to severe), interstitial lung disease, cystic fibrosis and pulmonary hypertension
- Dementia or other neurological conditions
- Diabetes (type 1 or type 2)
- Down syndrome
- Heart conditions (such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, cardiomyopathies or hypertension)
- HIV infection
- Immunocompromised state (weakened immune system)
- Liver disease
- Mental health conditions, including depression and schizophrenia spectrum disorders
- Overweight and obesity (defined as a body mass index of 25 or greater)
- Pregnancy
- Sickle cell disease or thalassemia
- Smoking (current or former)
- Solid organ or blood stem cell transplant (includes bone marrow transplants)
- Stroke or cerebrovascular disease, which affects blood flow to the brain
- Substance use disorders (such as alcohol, opioid or cocaine use disorder)
- Tuberculosis

What Can You Do to Reduce Your Risk of Catching COVID-19?
There are several ways you can reduce your risk of getting sick from COVID-19. Chief among them: get vaccinated. The FDA has officially approved two vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna and both of these vaccines have been updated to target current versions of the virus.

The FDA has issued an emergency-use authorization (EUA) for an updated COVID-19 vaccine developed by Novavax for people 12 and older.

All three vaccines are effective at preventing hospitalization and death from COVID-19. Health officials are encouraging everyone 6 months and older to get vaccinated for COVID-19 ahead of fall and winter virus season.

A few other ways to lower the likelihood of getting sick from COVID-19: Wear a high-quality face mask when you're in public indoor settings, avoid crowds and poorly ventilated spaces, and wash your hands often.

Do Vaccines Have Side Effects?
It's common to experience mild to moderate side effects after getting vaccinated, such as soreness in the arm, headache, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, nausea, fever, or chills but these are temporary "and normal signs that your body is building protection," the CDC says.
A small number of vaccine recipients have experienced adverse reactions to the shots. These serious events after COVID-19 vaccination "are rare but may occur," the CDC says.

Anaphylaxis, an allergic reaction, has occurred in a small share of the vaccinated population, approximately five cases per 1 million doses administered. This is why you may be asked to wait about 15 minutes after your shot or booster to monitor for symptoms. Vaccine providers are equipped with medicines to quickly treat the reaction.

Health officials are monitoring reports of myocarditis or pericarditis in some adolescents and younger adults after vaccination with the Pfizer, Moderna and Novavax vaccines. Most of these patients who received care responded well to medicine and felt better quickly, the CDC says. It's also monitoring rare reports of Guillain-Barre syndrome, which was more commonly associated with the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, which is no longer available.

Can You Get COVID-19 Even If You Have Been Vaccinated?
No vaccine is 100 percent effective, so while the COVID-19 vaccines can lower your risk of getting a coronavirus infection, it's still possible to get COVID-19, this is known as a breakthrough infection. People with breakthrough infections, however, are less likely to get severely sick or die from COVID, multiple research studies show.

What Are the Symptoms of COVID-19?
People with COVID-19 have reported a wide range of symptoms that typically appear two to 14 days after exposure to the virus, including:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- Loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

This list is not exhaustive, and more unusual symptoms have been noted throughout the pandemic, from cognitive complications to skin rashes.

Most people with COVID-19 can recover at home. However, if you develop emergency warning signs, pain, or pressure in the chest; disorientation or confusion; pale, gray or blue-colored skin, lips or nail beds; difficulty breathing; or an inability to wake or stay awake, get medical attention immediately.

What Should I Know About Testing?
Testing can help keep you and others around you safe. If you're experiencing symptoms, test yourself. As of Sept. 25, each U.S. household is eligible to receive four free COVID-19 tests from the government by ordering online at covidtests.gov. At-home tests are also available at many pharmacies and community health centers. You can search for free testing options at testinglocator.cdc.gov

What should You DO If Your Get Sick?
If your test is positive, talk to your doctor right away about treatments that can help keep you out of the hospital. These treatments work best when started right away, so don't delay. (See the following section for more details.)

If you have COVID-19, it's important to stay home and separate yourself from others for at least five days, even if you don't develop symptoms and don't feel sick. And for at least 10 days, you should wear a mask when around others. If your symptoms persist after five days, you may need to isolate for longer.

Are There Treatments for COVID-19?
Yes. A few medications are available to treat COVID-19, though this list changes as new variants emerge. With the current batch of omicron subvariants circulating, three treatments are available to patients in the U.S.:

- Paxlovid, a prescription oral antiviral pill
- Veklury (remdesivir), an antiviral medication given by IV
- Lagevrio (molnupiravir), a prescription oral antiviral pill

If you test positive for COVID-19 and are over the age of 50 or have medical conditions that put you at higher risk for severe illness, talk to your doctor right away about treatment options.

What Are the Variants?
Public health officials have identified several new strains of the coronavirus, some of which are more contagious and may cause more severe illness. In the U.S., the biggest variant of concern is omicron and its descendants.

Pfizer and Moderna have vaccines that better target these more recent versions of the coronavirus, and everyone age 6 months and older is encouraged to get one.

What is Long COVID?
Many COVID-19 survivors battle lingering symptoms for weeks or months after infection, even if the initial infection was mild or asymptomatic. Sometimes called “long-haulers,” they suffer from dizziness, insomnia, confusion, a racing heart or a host of other lasting effects that keep them from getting back to their normal lives. A report published by the CDC found that as many as 1 in 4 older adults with COVID-19 had new or lingering symptoms.
Experts encourage COVID-19 patients experiencing long COVID to seek care from a medical provider. Several U.S. hospitals and research centers have set up special clinics and rehabilitation services for survivors.