



Note from Janet Church, President & CEO of the Sjögren's Foundation:

The Sjögren's Foundation would like to thank Dr. Calabrese for consistently keeping our patient population accurately informed about COVID-19, vaccines and boosters. The Foundation encourages all Sjögren's patients who are not immunosuppressed to get your booster/third shot quickly (if you have not already). Remember that the vaccine takes two weeks for full efficacy, and you will want to stay healthy in the New Year! If you have questions about your own drug therapy and the third vaccine, please consult your doctor.

**As a reminder, the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are messenger RNA vaccines, also called mRNA vaccines. mRNA vaccines are some of the first COVID-19 vaccines authorized and approved for use in the United States.*

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has updated its recommendations for COVID-19 vaccines with a preference for people to receive an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine (Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna). Everyone ages 16 and older can receive a booster shot.

COVID-19 in the New Year – Why it's so Important to Get Your 3rd Vaccine Now

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While we had all been hoping that the start of the New Year in 2022 would bring with it some good news about the pandemic nearing its end, unfortunately that is far from the case. COVID-19 is surging worse than ever before, hospitals are reaching maximum capacity across the country, and elective surgeries are being cancelled to free up hospital beds for COVID-19 patients. This is sadly reminiscent of the early days of the pandemic. While we have come so far with the rapid authorization of highly effective vaccines, unfortunately the pace of vaccination could not keep up, and heading into the holidays we are in trouble.

Now it is more important than ever to ensure that you and your loved ones are fully vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19, even if you've already had it, and even if you feel you don't have any risk factors for getting sick. We are now facing a new variant of the virus called Omicron, which is likely to quickly become the dominant variant of COVID-19 in the U.S. and the rest of the world. It is far more contagious than previous variants such as delta. We still have much to learn about Omicron, but the good news is that being fully vaccinated **and boosted** appears to protect against severe disease and death. Pfizer and BioNTech provided an update on their vaccine's protection against the variant, demonstrating that a 3rd dose of the Pfizer vaccine increased antibody levels against Omicron by 25 times.



We have also learned that just 2 shots are not enough. Omicron has without a doubt compromised the effect of the two-dose mRNA* vaccine series, reducing overall protection. Reinforcing the utmost importance of getting a booster/3rd vaccine dose, a study out of the United Kingdom compared 56,349 cases of Delta variant to 581 Omicron cases over two weeks and demonstrated vaccine effectiveness against Omicron infection was 30-40% after two vaccine doses but increased to 70-80% after a booster.

<https://khub.net/documents/135939561/430986542/Effectiveness+of+COVID-19+vaccines+against+Omicron+variant+of+concern.pdf/f423c9f4-91cb-0274-c8c5-70e8fad50074>.

Many feel that getting vaccinated is unnecessary if they already had a COVID-19 infection. However, we have learned that vaccination is the best form of protection against reinfection, which will become increasingly more common with the Omicron variant, and as other new variants arise. You can get COVID-19 more than once, and, if your case was less severe the first time, you can still get really sick with the second infection. One study demonstrated that patients who were not vaccinated but did have previous COVID-19 infection were at 5.5-fold higher risk of being hospitalized with COVID-19 illness, compared to those who received COVID-19 vaccination.

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7044e1.htm>.

Those on highly immunosuppressive drugs such as rituximab remain at highest risk for getting very sick if infected, even if fully vaccinated including with additional recommended doses. Rituximab-treated patients and family members of rituximab-treated patients need to be fully vaccinated, including a booster, and should not gather in large crowds around the holiday. Other drugs that may increase risk of getting very sick with COVID-19, even if vaccinated, are Cellcept®, and being on chronic steroids such as prednisone 10mg or more. Plaquenil® (hydroxychloroquine) is not immunosuppressive, and patients on Plaquenil® should be fully vaccinated/boosted just like everyone else.

This holiday season and into the New Year, I highly encourage you to be fully vaccinated, including your booster/additional dose, and encourage your loved ones to do the same. Surround yourselves with vaccinated people and keep large gatherings to a minimum. Keep rapid COVID-19 tests at home and test yourself or household members if any cold or respiratory symptoms are present. If you are on a highly immunosuppressive medication like rituximab, or higher dose steroids, I do recommend you wear a mask during family gatherings if more than a few people are present, especially if children are present who are too young to be vaccinated. We realize this puts a damper on many holiday plans, but it is important to stay safe. Reflecting over the past two trying years, if we can come out of this, it all will have been worth it.