

I GOT THE SHOT. NOW WHAT?

How to navigate your summer if and when
the pandemic winds down as predicted



BY MARY HELEN BERG

Welcome to the interim period. As an older American, you likely have had ample opportunity to be vaccinated against COVID-19, and it might seem like many of your friends have had the shot(s). But the reality is that many people around you still have not.

It's true that the speed of vaccinations ramped up significantly after President Biden urged states to open up availability to all adults. But experts say it'll be midsummer or later before a critical number of shots

have made it into people's arms. As this issue arrives in most mailboxes, about half the U.S. adult population should be at least partially vaccinated and over one-quarter should be fully so, based on a *New York Times* analysis of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data and Brown School of Public Health projections.

But it's also important to note that many children likely won't receive vaccines until as late as next year, according to epidemiologist Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy and a member of Biden's COVID-19 transition advisory board. Also, as of press

time, there was growing evidence of yet another spike in new coronavirus cases, many of which might be from variants of the original virus, and so less predictable. This summer, while you can resume many activities with a new sense of confidence, interacting with others will require a thoughtful and nuanced social dance. Remember: The vaccine simply helps give your body the tools it needs to fight COVID-19. Even after vaccination, it still may be possible to catch the coronavirus, or one of the new variants, and spread it. So, while your own social circle may be inoculated, for a few more months you will need to keep in mind the well-being of children, the partially vaccinated and those who are hesitant to get the shot.

Anthony Fauci, M.D., director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has said that the U.S. will reach herd immunity when 70 to 85 percent of the population—about 265 million people—is immune. But that number is “purely an estimate,” and it's unclear when we'll get there, Fauci told the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions in March.

The good news is that a vaccine will allow you to get a fair amount of your pre-pandemic life back this summer. But “to only focus on the vaccinated is not fair to the people who have not been vaccinated,” says Thomas Tsai, M.D., assistant professor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Here are answers to key questions about summertime activities and how to approach them.

What can I do immediately after getting vaccinated? First off, the basics: You have probably seen this advice before, but the vaccines take about two weeks to fully build immunity in the body, and masks in public are still important until herd immunity is reached because even vaccinated people can still pass on the virus. But the first thing you can do after that two-week waiting period is visit with other fully vaccinated friends.

What I really want to do is hug my grandchildren. Can I do that? Go ahead and hug, but wear a mask and skip the kisses for now. There's a slight chance that you could transmit the virus to your grandchild without knowing, says Eric Toner, M.D., a senior

scholar at the Center for Health Security at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "It's unlikely that your grandchild would have a serious illness from it," he says. "But on rare occasions, they do." Adds Tsai: "Is the risk ever going to become zero? No. But the benefit from the hug, I think, outweighs the risk."

Do I need to take special precautions when I take my grandkids out? Yes. Depending on the results of vaccine trials and the availability of the vaccine, some older children could receive shots in late summer or fall, but others won't get them until 2022, experts say. Choose an outdoor activity like a hike over a visit to a crowded theme park—and wear masks, says Robert Kim-Farley, M.D., an epidemiologist at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. Any venue that doesn't practice physical distancing for patrons should be off-limits.

What about going out to dinner, to the movies or back to religious services? Outdoor activities are still safest. But Toner says once you're vaccinated, you can dine indoors, go to the movies and attend other indoor events relatively safely if establishments are following mask, occupancy and distancing guidelines. "Don't push the envelope" by going to crowded venues just yet, Kim-Farley says, especially in a community where cases of the virus remain widespread. As for rejoining the choir? For now, stick with singing in the shower. "We know there are numerous cases of superspreading connected with choirs," Toner says.

Are road trips OK? Yes, if you are careful and mindful. Toner, who is vaccinated, is weighing a drive from Baltimore to Michigan to visit his 2½-year-old grandson, as well as a "carefully considered" road trip with vaccinated friends to visit national parks. While traveling in a car with other vaccinated people

is safe, Toner says he'd avoid a road trip with people who are unvaccinated since close quarters increase risk of infection. Tsai, also vaccinated, plans a trip from Boston to

Cape Cod this summer to see his 67-year-old mom, who is vaccinated. If some travelers in your group aren't vaccinated, Tsai recommends they test for the coronavirus before the trip, wear masks when possible and keep the car windows open.

How should I approach the Fourth of July family reunion?

The CDC recommends that you continue to avoid large in-person gatherings, even if you're vaccinated. But if you do get a group of family members together, have vaccinated people serve the food, Toner suggests. If you aren't sure that all guests have had shots, you should wear a mask, maintain physical distance and eat your barbecue outside. It's also safer not to hug or shake hands with unvaccinated people, Toner says.

Is it safe to swim in the outdoor community pool or at the beach?

There's no evidence that the virus spreads to people through water, according to the CDC. So feel free to cool off or do your laps, but keep a safe distance. Toner plans to swim in his public pool this summer. But even though he's vaccinated, he says he'll avoid it if it's crowded. As for the beach, "the risk of transmission is very low unless you're really cheek by jowl with people you don't know. And that's not going to be a very pleasant beach experience anyway," Toner says.

Can I enjoy a baseball game? An outdoor concert? As of April, the CDC still recommended that even fully vaccinated people avoid medium and large crowds. If you choose to take the risk, try to physically distance, and if you're seated close to others, wear a mask throughout the event. Avoid the

concession stands and restrooms if possible. A few venues have said they might introduce scheduled restroom visits and food pickups via cellphone apps to prevent crowding.

Parks and trails are getting more crowded, but now fewer people are wearing masks. Should I avoid these spots? Get outdoors and enjoy the sunshine and exercise but—you guessed it—wear a mask and maintain physical distance if there's a steady stream of hikers approaching you on your trail.

Should I scour veggies from the farmers market more than usual? There's no need. Even before vaccinations were widespread, the CDC said that the risk of virus transmission through food was low. Toner says it's enough to clean produce as you normally would. Shopping at an outdoor farmers market presents a lower infection risk than indoor shopping, but you should still try to maintain a safe distance from other shoppers and continue to wear a mask.

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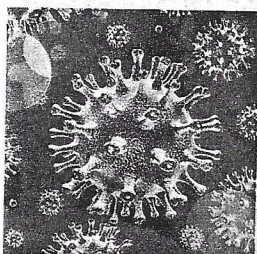
—Thomas Tsai, M.D., assistant professor at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

Should I deep clean our summer vacation rental when we arrive? No. You're there to relax! Remember, it's rare to catch the virus by touching a surface. If truly concerned, clean high-touch surfaces such as light switches, faucets and remote controls.

I've been working remotely, and my company now says I need to report back in a month. Is it safe to return? What should I expect and how should I prepare? If you are fully vaccinated and two weeks have passed since your final shot, you can return to work safely, experts say. But verify that your workplace has good ventilation and provides for plenty of space between coworkers; it should also have made arrangements to have high-touch surfaces cleaned frequently. ■

Mary Helen Berg has written for USA Today and the Los Angeles Times, among other media outlets.

VACCINE UPDATES



Bookmark aarp.org/coronavirus for regular updates about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination efforts, including:

- State-by-state COVID vaccine guides, with information on how to book an appointment where you live. Also available in Spanish at aarp.org/infovacuna.
- A coronavirus FAQ, which includes daily vaccine updates.
- Additional vaccine information and resources, from preparing for potential side effects to traveling safely after you're vaccinated.
- AARP also has news about vaccinations at nursing homes, including advice for visitors, at aarp.org/nursinghomes.



Your AARP Where We Stand

BY JO ANN JENKINS, CEO

THE VACCINES AND FAIRNESS

**AARP is fighting to make sure
older Americans have the
option to be protected**

When President Biden announced in early March that the United States would have enough COVID-19 vaccine available

for every adult American by Memorial Day, it raised our hopes that a much longed-for return to normalcy may be closer than we thought when the year began.

Whether that happens depends on how quickly—and how many—people receive their shots. While the decision of whether or not to get vaccinated is an individual choice, our research shows that the large majority of Americans 50 and older are eager to be inoculated so they can take that important step toward resuming life with family and friends. That's reassuring because people in that age group are the most at risk, accounting for more than 95 percent of those who have died from COVID-19 in this country.

For the good of all of us, we urge you to get vaccinated.

Among those who have not yet received their shots, the anticipation is accompanied by increased frustration. We've heard from so many of you that you are not getting the clear information you need to make a decision. In fact, nearly 60 percent of older Americans say they don't have details about when and where they can get inoculated. And we know that some people need assistance in getting to a place where vaccines are available.

We want to cut through the confusion with clear details to help you make your decision,

so that getting protected is as easy as possible and everyone in our age demographic has the opportunity. AARP has already been involved in the successful fight to make sure that the vaccine was free and that older people were given a priority when supplies were limited.

And we've been working hard to provide all the information you need. On our website, aarp.org, we have information on efforts to make vaccines available in all 50 states. Our state and national offices are updating this information daily with new developments.

But there is another problem. So far there has not been equity in distributing the vaccines. Black and Hispanic populations have been hit hard by the pandemic. Nursing homes with mostly minority patients have had three times as many deaths.

Yet, the initial vaccine distribution has not benefited those groups as much as others. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that only 7 percent of the supplies of vaccine have gone to Black individuals.

AARP believes we have to do better. So we have joined with five of the nation's largest private organizations—with more than 60 million combined members—to launch a COVID vaccine equity and education initiative.

Also involved are the American Diabetes Association, the American Psychological Association, the International City/County Management Association, the National League of Cities and the YMCA. Our efforts aim to ensure that accurate and transparent information about the vaccine is available to African Americans so they can make informed decisions about vaccination.

Having enough vaccine for every adult American is a huge step in defeating the coronavirus. But now we must take the next step of ensuring that it reaches everyone who wants it. There is no time to waste. ■



Number of deaths in
U.S. from COVID-19

95%
of those deaths
were Americans
50 and older

34%
of fatalities have
been residents
or staff in nursing
homes/long-term
care facilities

7%
The percentage of
vaccines that have
gone to African
Americans*

*Source: CDC as of
March 7