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The road to COVID-19 herd immunity and boosting booster rates for seniors

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- COVID-19 cases continue to increase, with hospitalizations rising in 49 states as of Friday. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is reporting that about 60% of Americans have contracted at least one strain of the COVID-19 virus. Some healthcare experts have modeled much higher estimates, accounting for estimated unreported cases or asymptomatic cases that were never acknowledged.
- A writer for *The Atlantic* reminded readers this week that “classic” herd immunity is not likely at this point. With the recent rise in cases as well as the tendency for immunity after contracting the virus to apparently wane over time, the U.S. may have to settle for “immunity lite,” a gradual accumulating effect that is helpful but doesn’t introduce anything close to an “off switch.”

Still, this is better than nothing—as the writer comments, “Even if infections continue to happen, they do not have to happen as frequently as they now do. That sort of equilibrium will take work to achieve and to maintain, as antibody levels ebb over time and new variants crop up. But it’s the difference between recognizing infections as somewhat typical and dismissing them as normal—between recognizing that this virus is a part of our lives going forward, and inviting ourselves to succumb entirely to it.”

- One way to ensure immunity lasts longer and is more widespread is booster shots. Unfortunately, about one-third of Americans aged 65 and older—the age cohort that represents 75% of COVID-19 deaths in the U.S.—have not received even one booster shot. This is putting them at great risk, especially as mask mandates are lifted.

A recent *Kaiser Health News* piece explores why seniors aren’t getting boosted. While misinformation and politically driven messaging may be one factor, the way the federal government has distributed vaccines is likely a key driver as well. Vaccines were well distributed to places like nursing homes when they were first available, but boosters have not been treated the same way, leaving individual providers responsible for encouraging their patients to get boosted and administering (and acquiring) the boosters.

This is not a reliable system, as most record-keeping systems aren't set up to track who has been boosted.

Increased federal messaging and support for wider distribution would help, as would local efforts to boost large groups of seniors (and others) at once. Eric Topol, MD, Chair of Innovative Medicine at the Scripps Research Institute, commented, "It will be hard to reboot now. But an aggressive, all-out campaign for seniors—whatever it takes—is certainly indicated...These people are the sitting ducks."

- Several medical and healthcare professional groups, including the American Hospital Association and American Medical Association, have been lobbying to extend the federal COVID-19 health emergency. It was last extended on April 16 to go through mid-July. On Monday this week, it was reported that the Biden Administration is set to extend the public health emergency for an additional 90 days. The declaration enables access to certain reserve funds and waives or modifies certain governmental (Medicare, Medicaid, and CHIP) rule requirements, like cross-state telehealth practice restrictions. It also allows emergency authorizations of drugs and vaccines and eliminates out-of-pocket costs for those drugs to patients.

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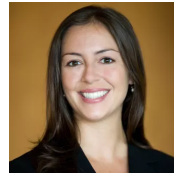
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