

CDC expands booster rollout

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MIKE STOBBE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Millions more Americans can get a COVID-19 booster and choose a different company's vaccine for that next shot, federal health officials said Thursday.

Certain people who received Pfizer vaccinations months ago already are eligible for a booster and now the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says specific Moderna and Johnson & Johnson recipients qualify, too. And in a bigger change, the agency is allowing the flexibility of "mixing and matching" that extra dose regardless of which type people received first.

The Food and Drug Administration had already authorized such an expansion of the nation's booster campaign on Wednesday, and it was also endorsed Thursday

by a CDC advisory panel. CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky had the final word on who gets the extra doses.

"These past 20 months have taught us many things, but mostly to have humility," she told the panel. "We are constantly learning about this virus, growing the evidence base and accumulating more data."

There still are restrictions on who qualifies and when for a booster. Starting six months past their last Pfizer or Moderna vaccination, people are urged to get a booster if they're 65 or older, nursing home residents, or at least 50 and at increased risk of severe disease because of health problems. Boosters also were allowed, but not urged, for adults of any age at increased risk of infection because of health problems or their jobs or living conditions. That includes health care workers, teachers and people in jails or homeless shelters.

Moderna's booster will come at half the dose of the original two shots.

As for recipients of the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, a COVID-19 booster is recommended for everyone at least two months after their vaccination. That's because the Johnson & Johnson vaccine hasn't proved as protective as the two-dose Moderna or Pfizer options.

The CDC panel didn't explicitly recommend anyone get a different brand than they started with but left open the option — saying only that a booster of some sort was recommended. And some of the advisers said they would prefer that Johnson & Johnson recipients receive a competitor's booster, citing preliminary data from an ongoing government study that suggested a bigger boost in virus-fighting antibodies from that combination.

"We're at a different place in the pandemic than we were earlier" when supply

constraints meant people had to take whatever shot they were offered, noted CDC adviser Dr. Helen Keipp Talbot of Vanderbilt University.

She called it "priceless" to be able to choose a different kind for the booster if, for example, someone might be at risk for a rare side effect from a specific vaccine.

About two-thirds of Americans eligible for COVID-19 shots are fully vaccinated, and the government says getting first shots to the unvaccinated remain the priority. While health authorities hope boosters will shore up waning immunity against milder coronavirus infections, all the vaccines still offer strong protection against hospitalizations and death, even as the extra-contagious delta variant burned through the country.

And CDC's advisers wrestled with whether people who didn't really need boosters might be getting them, especially young, otherwise



Wilfredo Lee/AP Photo

Syringes filled with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at a mobile vaccination site in Miami earlier this year.

healthy adults whose only qualification was their job.

Dr. Sarah Long of Drexel University voiced concerns about opening those people to rare but serious side effects from another dose if they already were adequately protected.

"I have my own concerns that we appear to be recommending vaccines for people who I don't think need it," added Dr. Beth Bell of the University of Washington.

But she stressed that the vaccines work and that mov-

ing forward with the recommendations makes sense for the sake of being clear and allowing flexibility when it comes to boosters.

Despite the concerns by some members, the panels' votes ended up being unanimous.

The vast majority of the nearly 190 million Americans who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 have received the Pfizer or Moderna options, while Johnson & Johnson recipients account for only about 15 million.

Startup opens drone factory in Bend

By TOM BANSE
Northwest News Network

With all the news about supply chain problems, you might be wondering how to get your online purchases on time. If only the promised future of aerial delivery by drone could be realized during the upcoming holiday shopping season.

Sorry to burst your bubble. To quote the sci-fi writer William Gibson, "The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed."

A venture capital-backed startup has opened a factory in Bend to build delivery drones. But Volansi Inc.'s flying machines won't bring gifts to you. They are focusing on high-margin, business-to-business use cases, such as delivery of spare parts and medicines.

Amazon founder and then-CEO Jeff Bezos planted the idea for drone delivery in a lot of consumers' minds way back in 2013. That's when Bezos went on CBS's "60 Minutes" to unveil his company's prototype Prime Air drones. It created quite a buzz, and not just from the electric octocopter blades.

"I know this looks like science fiction. It's not," Bezos told correspondent Charlie Rose. "It drops your package; come and get your package. We can do half-hour delivery."

Bezos predicted this capability could become reality by 2018-19, but that turned out to be too optimistic. Amazon has been fairly guarded about its drone development program and through a spokesperson Tuesday declined to give a status update.

Other big companies such as Walmart, UPS, FedEx and Google parent Alphabet are wading into drone delivery too, but they are limited to early stage testing in the U.S. by still evolving regulations.

At the same time, investors are backing a whole bunch of startups with delivery drones. One of these, Volansi, opened an assembly line in Bend within the past year.

Vice President for Production and Maintenance Ahmad Ziada gave a rare peek onto the spotless manufacturing floor earlier this month.

"We build here between five to 10 per month. Our

'THERE'S SO MUCH BETWEEN THE TAKEOFF POINT TO HOW IT GETS TO YOUR PROPERTY. WHAT IF YOUR PROPERTY IS SURROUNDED BY TALL TREES? THERE ARE JUST SO MANY PROBLEMS.'

Patrick Sherman | a Portland-based instructor and drone pilot with Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

capacity is 10 because of the people we have, not because of anything else," Ziada said of the growing Bend operation, which has hired about 45 workers.

Behind him gleamed an eye-catching row of all-electric, winged VOLY C10 autonomous aircraft. They clasp lunchbox-sized storage boxes under their bellies. Volansi's medium-sized, vertical takeoff-and-landing drones can carry up to 10 pounds for as far as 50 miles.

Volansi also manufactures a larger, longer-range drone model at a facility near its San Francisco Bay Area headquarters. The VOLY M20 can carry up to 20 pounds of cargo as well as a sensor payload. It has hybrid gas-electric propulsion.

As to the cost? "We're still trying to figure that out," Ziada said during a tour.

The small company won't try to compete with e-commerce giants like Amazon or Walmart in delivering to households. VP for Global Operations Mike Jackson said Volansi is going after different markets. He mentioned cargo delivery for the military and shuttling spare parts for commercial customers in the construction, mining and oil and gas fields. Delivering medicines or disaster relief supplies is another promising proposition.

"We're not necessarily going into a neighborhood," Jackson said. Instead, Volansi's drones might fly from a factory or a warehouse to a construction site. "We're going to solve and provide value on supply chain problems for our customers," he said.

Jackson figured that business-to-business drone delivery will likely win approval sooner, would be easier to pull off and turn a profit quicker. This summer, Volansi demon-

strated for the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard how it could move small cargoes between two moving ships at sea. A separate demonstration with the North Carolina Department of Transportation showed how its drones could deliver life-saving supplies to the Outer Banks after a disaster, such as a hurricane.

At this time, Volansi doesn't have customers in the Pacific Northwest. So, why did the San Francisco-based company pick Bend for its factory?

Jackson said the selection criteria during a national search included talent availability, cost, proximity to potential suppliers and partners, favorable flying weather and quality of life for employees.

"Bend hits the mark on every single one of those," Jackson said.

As for when the average consumer can order dinner or presents and have the purchase swiftly delivered by drone, "it's going to be a while yet," according to Patrick Sherman, a Portland-based instructor and drone pilot with Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

"I am certainly not going to say we will never have a Christmas gift delivered at 11:59 p.m. on Christmas Eve by a drone, but that is about the most challenging sort of operation you could ever hope to complete with a drone," Sherman said. "There's so much between the takeoff point to how it gets to your property. What if your property is surrounded by tall trees? There are just so many problems."

Sherman said the low altitude air traffic control needed for delivery drones to fly safely is getting a lot of attention, but is "far from solved at this point." Public acceptance is still an unknown. Regulators also need to certify the

new aircraft and it would help to define drone corridors in the sky to reduce conflicts.

Sherman and Jackson presented earlier this month about industry developments at a drone conference in Bend put on by the Association of Unmanned Vehicle Systems International Cascade Chapter.

Also at the conference, Olivier Defawe, director of health systems at the Seattle-based global health nonprofit VillageReach, described how Africa is serving as a proving ground and early adopter of cargo drones. He said his nonprofit partnered with several different drone companies to show how "2-way drone delivery" could overcome logistical challenges of delivering perishable vaccines to



Tom Banse/Northwest News Network

Volansi executives Mike Jackson, left, and Ahmad Ziada at the drone delivery company's Bend manufacturing facility.

remote villages and returning to a central office with lab samples.

Defawe said VillageReach, with outside sponsorship, had supported vaccination campaigns and blood and medicine delivery trials in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Malawi, Mozambique and the Dominican

Republic. He said a barrier to wider adoption of drone delivery was the "big, black box" of whether the cost per flight will be affordable in the developing world. A cost study that VillageReach is involved in is slated to publish next March.

"It's a long journey to sustained operation," Defawe concluded.

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