

Explainer: New easy-to-use COVID-19 pills come with a catch

By Tom Murphy
The Associated Press

Newly infected COVID-19 patients have two new treatment options that can be taken at home. But that convenience comes with a catch: The pills have to be taken as soon as possible once symptoms appear.

The challenge is getting tested, getting a prescription, and starting the pills in a short window.

U.S. regulators authorized Pfizer's pill, Paxlovid, and Merck's molnupiravir in December. In high-risk patients, both were shown to reduce the chances of hospitalization or death from COVID-19, although Pfizer's was much more effective.

A closer look:

Who should take these pills?

The antiviral pills aren't for everyone who gets a positive test. The pills are intended for those with mild or moderate COVID-19 who are more likely to become seriously ill. That includes older people and those with other health conditions like heart disease, cancer, or diabetes that make them more vulnerable. Both pills were OK'd for adults while Paxlovid is authorized for children ages 12 and older.

Who shouldn't take these pills?

Merck's molnupiravir is not authorized for children because it might interfere with bone growth. It also isn't recommended for pregnant women because of the potential for birth defects. Pfizer's pill isn't recommended for patients with severe kidney or liver problems. It also may not be the best option for some because it may interact with other prescriptions a patient is taking. The antiviral pills aren't authorized for people hospitalized with COVID-19.

What's the treatment window?

The pills have to be started as soon as possible, within



EARLY EFFICACY. Pictured are Merck & Co.'s new antiviral medication molnupiravir (left) and Pfizer's COVID-19 Paxlovid pills (right). Newly infected COVID-19 patients have two new treatment options that can be taken at home. But that convenience comes with a catch: The pills have to be taken as soon as possible once symptoms appear.

five days of the start of symptoms. Cough, headache, fever, the loss of taste or smell, and muscle and body aches are among the more common signs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers a website to check your symptoms.

Dr. Cameron Wolfe, an infectious disease specialist at Duke University Hospital, advises getting a test as soon as you have symptoms of COVID-19.

"If you wait until you have started to get breathless, you have already to a large extent missed the window where these drugs will be helpful," Wolfe said.

Where can I get the pills?

You'll need a prescription first from a doctor or other authorized health worker. The U.S. government is buying the pills from Merck and Pfizer and providing them for free, but supplies will be limited initially. They'll be shipped to states where they will be available at drugstores, community health centers, and other places. Treatment lasts five days.

Some pharmacists may be able to administer a quick

COVID-19 test and prescribe the pills all in one visit. They already do this in many states for flu or strep throat.

Will the pills work for the omicron variant?

The pills are expected to be effective against omicron because they don't target the spike protein where most of the variant's worrisome mutations reside. The two pills work in different ways to prevent the virus from reproducing.

Are there other options for new COVID-19 patients?

Yes, but they aren't as easy to use as a pill: They are given by IV or injection, typically at a hospital or clinic. Three drugs provide virus-fighting antibodies, although laboratory testing suggests the two aren't effective against omicron. British drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline's antibody drug appears to work, and officials say they are working to increase the U.S. supply. The only antiviral drug approved in the U.S., remdesivir, is for people hospitalized with COVID-19.

AP Health Writer Matthew Perrone contributed to this report.

Explainer: How will Biden's COVID-19 test giveaway work?

By Darlene Superville
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden says the federal government will buy half a billion COVID-19 rapid test kits and distribute them free of charge to people to use at home. But despite the high public demand for tests, it will still be several more weeks before these kits are available to be shipped. The administration is still working on details for how the program will work.

Pandemic mystery: Scientists focus on COVID's animal origins

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animals such as big cats, otters, and non-human primates; farm-raised mink; and white-tailed deer.

Most got the virus from people, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which says that humans can spread it to animals during close contact but that the risk of animals transmitting it to people is low.

Another fear, however, is that animals could unleash new viral variants. Some wonder if the omicron variant began this way.

"Around the world, we might have animals potentially incubating these variants even if we get (COVID-19) under control in humans," said David O'Connor, a virology expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "We're probably not going to do a big giraffe immunization program any time soon."

Worobey said he has been looking for genetic fingerprints that might indicate whether omicron was created when the virus jumped from humans to an animal, mutated, and then leaped back to people.

Experts say preventing zoonotic disease will require not only cracking down on illegal wildlife sales but making progress on big global problems that increase risky human-animal contact, such as habitat destruction and climate change.

Failing to fully investigate the animal origin of the virus, scientists said in the *Cell* paper, "would leave the world vulnerable to future pandemics arising from the same human activities that have

Does the government have the tests?

Not yet. At press time, the departments of Defense and Health and Human Services were "executing on what's called an 'accelerated emergency contract,'" according to White House press secretary Jen Psaki. The contract is expected to be signed soon.

When will the test kits be delivered?

The first delivery is expected in early January. All 500 million kits will not arrive at the same time but instead will be delivered in batches.

repeatedly put us on a collision course with novel viruses."

"Toxic" politics

But further investigation is stymied by superpower politics. Lawrence Gostin of Georgetown University said there has been a "bare-knuckles fight" between China and the United States.

"The politics around the origins investigation has literally poisoned the well of global cooperation," said Gostin, director of the WHO Collaborating Center on National and Global Health Law. "The politics have literally been toxic."

An AP investigation last year found that the Chinese government was strictly controlling all research into COVID-19's origins and promoting fringe theories that the virus could have come from outside the country.

"This is a country that's by instinct very closed, and it was never going to allow unfettered access by foreigners into its territory," Gostin said.

Still, Gostin said there's one positive development that has come out of the investigation.

WHO has formed an advisory group to look into the pandemic's origins. And Gostin said that while he doubts the panel will solve the mystery, "they will have a group of highly qualified scientists ready to be deployed in an instant in the next pandemic."

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My drugstore doesn't have any tests. how can I get a free kit from the government?

You'll go to a new government website to request a kit, but the site won't be functional until after the first batch of test kits have been delivered, Psaki said. She said the process was being handled that way to avoid creating more confusion for the public. But the idea is that anyone who wants a test kit would log onto this website to request one.

"We're obviously not going to put the website up until there are tests available," Psaki said.

Which home test will I get?

It's unclear. But Psaki noted that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved several different brands of rapid home tests that are currently on the market.

Will I be limited to one test or can I request multiple?

To be determined, Psaki said.

Why is Biden buying these test kits?

It represents an acknowledgement by the president that the administration needs to do more to increase access to COVID-19 testing, which is an important tool to help slow the spread of the coronavirus.

In cases where infected people show symptoms or not, testing is the only way to

find out if they have the virus so they can avoid being out and about and potentially spreading disease.

But demand for test kits soared as the holidays neared and people grew eager to test themselves and their families before travelling and as the easily transmissible omicron variant spread rapidly in just a few weeks to become the dominant strain in the U.S.

Biden's promise of 500 million test kits is in addition to the administration's earlier pledge to send 50 million rapid tests to community health centers across the country.

How much will the program cost?

The purchase will be paid for with money from the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill Biden signed into law in March, the White House said. The exact cost will be known soon.

Is there another way to get a test kit for free

Biden said in a speech that starting in January private insurers will cover the cost of at-home testing. So people will have the option of buying tests at a store or online and then seeking reimbursement from their health insurance provider.

The government will also provide access to free at-home tests for people who may not have health insurance, Biden said.

Letting your face covering get wet may decrease its effectiveness and make it difficult to breathe.

Keep your mask dry by wearing a rain jacket with a hood, carrying an umbrella, or having another means to shield your face covering from the rain. You may also want to carry a spare, just in case.



For more information visit healthoregon.org/coronavirus or call 211

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