Older adults need a bivalent booster: Suggested talking points

- People 65 and older made up around 85 percent of recent COVID-19 deaths.
  - Waning immunity and new Omicron variants are causing more deaths among older adults, including those who are vaccinated or boosted.
  - COVID-19 vaccines still work, but many people need a boost in immunity to stay protected against new circulating variants.
  - The new bivalent boosters are better at preventing COVID-19 infections than earlier doses. This makes them especially important for older adults who are at higher risk of severe illness, hospitalization, and death.

- Less than one-third of people 65 and older have gotten a bivalent booster.
  - More adults 65 and older have received an updated booster than any other age group, but coverage is still nowhere near ideal.
  - Nearly half of people 65 and older did not know that the CDC recommended bivalent boosters for their age group as of September 2022.
  - If you are age 5 or older and it’s been two months since your last COVID-19 dose, it’s time to get your bivalent booster.
  - If you recently had COVID-19, get your bivalent booster after recovering from the illness and ending isolation. Your doctor may recommend waiting three months after infection to get your next dose.
  - There is no data yet on how the bivalent boosters will perform against the now dominant BQ.1 and BQ.1.1 variants, but they are our best bet right now.

- Bivalent boosters and antiviral treatments can protect you from the worst outcomes of COVID-19 infection.
  - The updated boosters are safe and effective. Compared to unvaccinated people, vaccinated people with a bivalent booster are much less likely to die from COVID-19.
  - It takes a couple of weeks after vaccination for your body to build immunity, so get your bivalent booster ASAP to be protected for the winter holidays.
  - Monoclonal antibody treatments do not work against new COVID-19 variants, but antivirals like Paxlovid are still effective and also reduce the chance of long COVID.
  - If you are immunocompromised or at high risk, consult your physician now about treatment options to be prepared if you get infected.
Older adults need a bivalent booster: Frequently asked questions

1. **Why are the majority of COVID-19 deaths among people who were vaccinated or boosted?**

More than half of COVID-19 deaths are among people who were vaccinated or boosted, according to KFF data from August 2022. This does not mean that COVID-19 vaccines are not effective, as studies have repeatedly shown that they make our immune systems perform better against the virus and its variants.

One of the reasons for the high proportion of deaths among the vaccinated is the fact that the vast majority of the U.S. is vaccinated or boosted. If 100 percent of people in the U.S. were vaccinated, vaccinated people would make up 100 percent of COVID-19 deaths. Vaccines are very effective but not perfect, so deaths will still occur among those who are vaccinated. Other contributing factors to the high proportion of deaths include waning immunity, variants that can evade our immunity, low uptake of bivalent boosters, and changing social behaviors.

2. **Why are COVID-19 deaths among older adults increasing?**

The risk of severe illness from COVID-19 increases with age. People 65 and older made up around 85 percent of COVID-19 deaths in the past month. This is likely because of waning immunity and the fact that many individuals have not been boosted recently—less than one-third of people 65 and older have been vaccinated with a bivalent booster.

3. **What are bivalent boosters and how can they protect us this winter?**

The bivalent boosters developed by Pfizer and Moderna are vaccines that target both the original COVID-19 strain and the BA.4 and BA.5 Omicron subvariants. The bivalent boosters are better at preventing symptomatic COVID-19 infections than earlier doses, making them especially crucial for older adults and other individuals who are immunocompromised or at high risk. Compared to unvaccinated people, vaccinated people with a bivalent booster are less likely to die from COVID-19. It’s still unclear how the bivalent boosters will perform against the now dominant BQ.1 and BQ.1.1 variants, but they are our best bet right now as cases, hospitalizations, and test positivity rates increase nationwide.