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Updates on COVID-19 Vaccines: Protecting Ourselves and Others

### Announcer:

You're listening to *VacciNation* on ReachMD, and this episode is sponsored by Moderna. Here's your host, Dr. Brian McDonough.

### Dr. McDonough:

Welcome to *VacciNation* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Brian McDonough, and joining me to discuss the importance of staying up to date with the COVID-19 vaccine, especially for patients who are 65 and older, is Dr. Georges Benjamin. He currently serves as the Executive Director of the American Public Health Association and is board-certified in internal medicine. Dr. Benjamin, glad to have you join us.

### Dr. Benjamin:

Thank you for having me.

### Dr. McDonough:

So if we start by doing some reflecting, Dr. Benjamin, can you tell us about the progress that's been made in the fight against COVID-19 since the pandemic began?

### Dr. Benjamin:

We've got to go back and remember what we looked like almost four years ago when we had real challenges. We did not have a vaccine. We did not have antiviral agents. We didn't have an adequate number of vaccinators. We certainly did not have testing that we needed. So we've made enormous progress in all of those areas, which I think makes it very clear that we can address COVID. But it's very important to know that while COVID has moderated substantially, it is still here today.

### Dr. McDonough:

I think that's a good point you're making, Dr. Benjamin. Obviously, we've come a long way, and I agree with you from those early days, treating patients and being patients and those who had to deal with it. But despite all the progress, I think, like you said, it is here to stay. So what are some of the key ways we can continue to protect ourselves and also protect others?

### Dr. Benjamin:

The most important thing, of course, is to understand our own infectious state. So if you have any kind of upper respiratory tract infection-like symptoms, sore throat, fever, headache, myalgias, muscle aches, etc. one should stay home. So anything that looks like cold symptoms, flu symptoms, stay home. And by the way, that includes now loose stools and diarrhea because we now know that is a symptom that many people see with many of the respiratory diseases that we have today.

Secondly, of course, is just good basic public health; hand washing, making ourselves sure we're well hydrated is part of that process; all those are important to try to both maintain health and to make sure we don't infect others. And then, if you're out and about, realizing that we still have COVID about; wearing a mask in an appropriate setting, like airports, big parties, places where you know you're going to be around others that you really don't know their health status. Better to mask up when appropriate than not mask up.

### Dr. McDonough:

I think you bring up a good point, especially with airports and travel, that you've got people from all over the place, and it's not that tough to do, and it can help you out to wear a mask, and also it helps others. I mean, it's really important. As a quick follow-up to that, are there any patient populations who would especially benefit from these preventive measures?

### Dr. Benjamin:

Yeah, we know that the extremes of age are certainly an increased risk. Now we know that kids do much better than adults, but age 65

years of age and older are at higher risk. People with chronic diseases, diabetes, hypertension, people who are overweight, people who are on immunosuppressive medications because of eczema or cancer chemotherapy, or many of the medications that we're now using to modulate our immune system, and people who are on those medicines know that what those medications are, those people are at increased risk that if they get COVID, they're much more likely to get sicker.

**Dr. McDonough:**

For those just tuning in, you're listening to *VacciNation* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Brian McDonough, and I'm speaking with Dr. Georges Benjamin about the progress that has been made against COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic.

Now let's really zero in on COVID-19 vaccines, Dr. Benjamin. How effective are they in preventing severe illness and complications in adults, and let's talk about it in all ages.

**Dr. Benjamin:**

Well, these vaccines are highly effective in preventing severe illness in almost all populations. And I strongly encourage them for people to get adequately and be quote unquote up to date. Up to date generally means about every six months. Now we know that we now have a new strain that's circulating, and the new vaccine that will be available soon, coming this fall, is structured to focus on this new strain, even though the current vaccines are pretty effective against those strains as well.

**Dr. McDonough:**

Not to digress, but I know over the years we've treated the flu with vaccines, and we've always been trying to keep up with it and trying to make sure we can anticipate. It sounds like a lot of the same things that you're trying to do here we're trying to keep up and provide the latest and best protection.

**Dr. Benjamin:**

Well, we are. And what we do with flu, of course, is we watch what's happening in the rest of the world, and then we see the kind of strains that are developing, and then we try to tailor the vaccine to address those strains. Well, the good news is we're doing the same thing with COVID. And because of the new technologies that we're using, it's very effective that we can make these vaccines a lot faster than we could, even than the flu vaccine. So it's really a neat process that we have now. And I again, encourage everybody to get vaccinated and maintain their vaccine status.

**Dr. McDonough:**

With all this in mind, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention currently recommends all patients above the age of five receive one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, and vulnerable patient populations, like some you talked about, can get additional doses. Can you tell us why, once again, these recommendations are so important?

**Dr. Benjamin:**

They're important because one of the things that we've learned with this COVID vaccine is that the coronavirus, which is in the family of cold viruses, is not durable. And that means that the vaccine becomes less effective after about three or four months. After about six months, it's still there, but it's just not as effective as the first few days after you get your shot. So I think that we try and encourage people to get vaccinated on a recurring schedule so they maintain the highest level of protection they possibly can.

**Dr. McDonough:**

So when they say the recommendations are one dose, we're talking about not just once in a lifetime, but we're talking about continuing this and moving forward over time.

**Dr. Benjamin:**

We're talking about continuing this and moving forward over time. And this is not a new process. Everybody knows that you get your tetanus shot theoretically every 10 years. We know that if you're going to go out of the country that we encourage people to get revaccinated with some of the vaccines that you need to get a quote unquote booster. So people ought to think about this as getting an updated shot every six months or so. And right now, it looks like, I can't be sure, but the pattern may be twice a year. Now I say that because one of the things that we're learning with this coronavirus is that what we knew today is not necessarily what we know tomorrow. And so today the recommendation is probably every six months, but that may very well change. And I think we're all learning to tell people this is what we know today, but if I come back and tell you something tomorrow it's because we've learned new stuff.

**Dr. McDonough:**

Dr. Benjamin, as we get into the fall and the winter, there's just so many things out there, RSV, COVID-19, the flu. What about testing people for these things, treating them, the idea of vaccines, it seems like everything really comes to a head that time of year?

**Dr. Benjamin:**

The interesting things about all these respiratory diseases is they all have the same symptoms. But the good news is we have tests for them. And we have a vaccine for RSV, for influenza, as well as for COVID. So by knowing what you have, knowing what you're vaccinated against, you can limit your risk. So I encourage people to, if you get these upper respiratory symptoms, fever, muscle ache, cough, sore throat, etc., to get tested. Again, you can get tested for flu, you can test for COVID. And everyone over the age of 60-65 ought to get the RSV shot and to protect themselves, and then you know you're protected.

**Dr. McDonough:**

And that brings up an interesting point, and maybe I can ask you if you have other advice, there are some people out there who don't like the vaccine for whatever reason or don't feel they should keep up or whatever. What pieces of advice do you have for them and for people about the importance of staying up to date? I mean, we now have tested this vaccine for quite some time. I'm just curious about your thoughts at this point being so involved in public health.

**Dr. Benjamin:**

We all understand the idea of hesitancy about getting something that's new. But this is a vaccine that has proven itself to be safe and effective, and so I encourage people to get vaccinated, and do your homework. Don't take my word for it. This is my best advice, but check it out, talk to people, other people you trust, talk to your doctor. Whoever your healthcare provider is talk with them. If you get your shots at the pharmacy on a routine basis, talk with your pharmacist. Get someone who has good clinical knowledge. And if you read something on social media that just doesn't sound right, verify it before you adopt that as a fact.

**Dr. McDonough:**

That's great advice. With those takeaways in mind, I want to thank my guest, Dr. Georges Benjamin, for joining me to discuss his insights on COVID-19 vaccine. Dr. Benjamin, it was really great to have you on the program, and I appreciate all the information you've been sharing.

**Dr. Benjamin:**

Listen, thank you very much. I appreciated being here, Dr. McDonough.

**Announcer:**

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