

UW Health: Two years since the first Wisconsin COVID-19 case, UW Health reflects on variants and vaccinations

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MADISON, Wis. – Two years ago, Feb. 5, 2020, UW Health confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in Wisconsin. It was the 12th confirmed case in the country at the time. As we approach two full years dealing with COVID-19, so much of the story revolves around vaccinations.

We spent most of the first year using the tools and knowledge we had to combat the virus and working toward the most powerful tool, an effective vaccine. When vaccine authorizations came through, we were right in the middle of our first really intense surge of COVID-19 cases, according to Dr. Jeff Pothof, chief quality officer, UW Health, and associate professor of emergency medicine, UW School of Medicine and Public Health.

“We were coming out of a difficult surge of cases and hospitalizations,” he said. “And we were excited about the prospect of vaccinating the community and protecting millions from infection, hospitalization and worse.”

Throughout 2021 vaccine supply expanded and the data was showing incredible efficacy. Eligibility expanded beyond the original universe of healthcare workers and the nation’s most vulnerable people to eventually include everyone five years and up, which gave hope to many, Pothof said.

“It really became a race between vaccination rates and COVID-19 variants,” he said. “Every person vaccinated not only protects themselves against the virus, but they help reduce the risk of further variants emerging. The omicron surge demonstrates the importance of vaccinations winning that race against the variants as the

pandemic enters its third year.”

To date, more than 8.8 million vaccine doses have been administered to Wisconsinites and nearly 60% of Wisconsinites five and older have completed their vaccination series according to [Wisconsin Department of Health Services](#).

Coinciding with the rise in vaccination availability, the past year also saw resistance to vaccinations and public health information from some segments of the population, according to Ajay Sethi, associate professor, population health sciences, faculty director, Master of Public Health program, UW School of Medicine and Public Health.

“We saw an unprecedented level of misinformation about vaccines and other measures people can use to protect themselves against COVID-19,” he said. “And 2021 showed us how difficult it can be to overcome that challenge.”

The race continues to vaccinate more and more of our population against the backdrop of unpredictable variants, very full hospitals and rampant misinformation. Much of that depends on our ability to explain the importance of vaccines. According to the latest [data from Wisconsin’s Department of Health Services](#)

- People not fully vaccinated were hospitalized with COVID-19 at a rate 10 times higher than people who were fully vaccinated.
- People not fully vaccinated died from COVID-19 at a rate 14 times higher than people who were fully vaccinated.

“Over 250 million Americans and 3.5 million Wisconsinites have at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine,” Sethi said. “On this second anniversary of the pandemic, many people understand that vaccination will help us out of this pandemic.”

Interviews with Pothof and Sethi are available.