

MEDIA RELEASE

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Don't wait for new vaccines to get your fourth COVID-19 jab, experts urge

Omicron-specific vaccines are still a long way off

Opting to delay a fourth COVID-19 jab until a new generation of Omicron-specific vaccines are available is a mistake, say health experts.

GPs in Melbourne's northern and western suburbs are reporting that some patients are putting off having coronavirus vaccines because they have been told versions more targeted toward the dominant Omicron strains are in development.

"We're hearing this quite a lot," said Dr Jeannie Knapp, a GP at Church St Medical Centre in Richmond. "There have been a lot of media stories recently about new vaccines, but they are a long way off and the existing ones still do a very good job of protecting people."

Peer reviewed studies from [Canada](#), [Israel](#), [Sweden](#) and other places in recent months have all concluded that four doses of existing COVID-19 vaccines provide strong protection against severe illness, hospitalisation or death caused by Omicron variants. Breakthrough infections, while not unknown, are also reduced.

"Vaccination is your best defence against becoming severely unwell with COVID," said Dr Charles Alpren, Acting Director of the Western Public Health Unit.

"With lots of virus still circulating in our community, we are urging Victorians not to delay getting their fourth dose. The best vaccine is the one you can get now.

"The vaccines currently available for free in our GPs, vaccination hubs and pharmacies are fantastic at preventing severe illness from a COVID-19 infection."

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) [recommends a fourth dose](#) for everyone aged 50 or older, and has made them available for all people over 30.

Pharmaceutical companies are working on a second generation of vaccines, but the required testing, approvals, manufacture and roll-out all seem some way off.

In Australia, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) issued a [provisional determination](#) to Moderna in April 2022 to start the approvals process for an Omicron-specific vaccine. It issued a [similar determination](#) to Pfizer in June.

The ruling gives both companies a maximum of six months to complete their registration applications, after which the TGA will undertake a detailed assessment. If it is satisfied that vaccines are safe and effective it will then refer them to ATAGI for final approval.

"With the best will in the world, this process has to be rigorous, and that takes time," says Christopher Carter, chief executive officer of North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network.

“I wouldn’t be at all surprised if these new vaccines, assuming they meet all the requirements, may not be available to any of us until after the New Year. That’s a long time to go without the maximum available protection – protection which you can get now, from your GP or pharmacist or vaccination centre, for free.”

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ABOUT PHNs

Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health, PHNs began operation on 1 July 2015 and are responsible for coordinating primary health care and facilitating improved health outcomes in their local community. Melbourne Primary Care Network operates the North Western Melbourne PHN.

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