

Looking Back to Get Ahead: One Year of COVID Vaccines

One year ago the nation celebrated what seemed like a light at the end of the pandemic tunnel. A safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine was made available on December 14, 2020 to health care workers and other qualifying members of the public.

The very next day, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker witnessed the first COVID-19 vaccinations in the state, as OSF HealthCare Mission Partners enthusiastically rolled up their sleeves in Peoria.

Dr. Stephen Hippler is the chief clinical officer for OSF HealthCare. He says he looks back on that day and remembers feelings of hope, as well as gratitude for the work that had been done by the scientific community to get us to that point.

I liken it to the landing on the moon many, many years ago when the entire scientific community was focused on one goal. And when all those brilliant minds around the world, not just the United States, are focused on a single problem, really wonderful and great things can happen," remarked Dr. Hippler. "I think the fact that we got a COVID vaccine so quickly, it went into mass production and distribution, and now over 487 million doses have been given in the United States is really a testament to the dedication and focus of our scientists and all the folks who support them logistically to get it done and get it into the arms of people."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), at least 197 million Americans are fully vaccinated, which is about 60% of the eligible population.

Despite this, the United States just hit a grim milestone – 800,000 lives lost to the virus in less than two years. The number is astounding, and according to Dr. Hippler, his advice today remains what it was 365 days ago: get vaccinated.

"This continues to be a pandemic of the unvaccinated," he said. "Yes, those who have had two doses sometimes get hospitalized, but they're typically not as sick. They don't need a ventilator and they have a much lower likelihood of dying. So it honestly is a little frustrating that this pandemic continues amongst the unvaccinated when there is a really good vaccine available to knock this down. As we enter the third winter of COVID, I don't think we want to go into a third summer and then start looking at a fourth winter of COVID."

The CDC is reporting overall cases in the U.S. have grown nearly 50% over the past two weeks as America is experiencing the early stages of another COVID surge. The new omicron variant is also causing concern.

As Dr. Hippler looks to the future, however, he still has hope. He says while it may be dimmed, the light at the end of the tunnel has not been extinguished.

"A year from now my hope is that more people are vaccinated, and that we'll have a couple oral pills available to treat early COVID," he said. "I think this will honestly become something that is always there; it'll never go away. But it's something we can easily recognize, test for, treat early with medication and have vaccine for that hopefully more people will avail themselves of. And with that, I think the incidence will go down."

To schedule a COVID-19 vaccine or booster, or to see if you are eligible, visit osfhealthcare.org/vaccine.