

HEAD: 5 Things To Know About Colorado's Plans To Handle COVID-19 Vaccines

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UC Health courtesy photo of vaccine trial boxes

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By Matt Bloom

On Monday, biotechnology company Moderna, Inc. announced its leading COVID-19 vaccine candidate was more than 94% effective at preventing illness, becoming the [second vaccine](#) in as many weeks to signal readiness for widespread distribution.

The promising results came amid a fresh wave of virus spread in Colorado and around the country. The spike in cases and hospitalizations has prompted public health officials to tighten capacity restrictions on businesses while heightening the sense of urgency among public health leaders preparing to distribute vaccines.

Ahead of the vaccine's arrival, KUNC has been looking into how the state is preparing to vaccinate millions of Coloradans over the next year. The current plan, which is still evolving, includes coordination between federal and state governments, local public health departments, hospitals, pharmacies and private distributors.

Here are five things to know about Colorado's current plans to handle COVID-19 vaccines, when they're available:

1. It's still unclear when the first doses will arrive.

The companies behind leading vaccine candidates still need to clear the federal government's high regulatory hurdles. That could take a while.

Both Pfizer and Moderna say they plan to file for emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration "within the coming weeks." Once that happens, they can start shipping doses out to healthcare providers across the country, including in Colorado.

Distribution of Moderna's vaccine, which is a part of Operation Warp Speed, will be handled by the CDC and, at the state level, the Colorado Department of Public Health

and Environment. Pfizer, which is not a part of the program, says it plans to ship doses directly to hospitals.

In a news conference on Nov. 9, Gov. Jared Polis estimated our state could see up to 200,000 doses of vaccine by the end of 2020. That's if the regulatory process goes smoothly. Polis said he arrived at the number by comparing the state's population size (in proportion to the rest of the country) to initial production estimates from vaccine manufacturers.

2. Not all healthcare facilities are equipped to handle all vaccines.

Pfizer's vaccine needs to be kept in extremely cold environments -- at least -70 degrees Celsius, or else it will go bad. That's colder than the average temperature at the North Pole.

According to the state's [draft vaccination plan](#), only two large healthcare systems have facilities with enough ultra-cold storage to handle those needs: UCHHealth and Kaiser Permanente. The facilities are located in Colorado's most populated counties, which leaves out a lot of rural areas of the state.

"There may not be other facilities outside of the state's 12 largest counties with high enough throughput to ensure (the Pfizer vaccine) is administered quickly enough given the challenging storage and handling requirements," the plan reads.

In a statement, a UCHHealth spokeswoman confirmed the hospital system was preparing to store and administer Pfizer's vaccine along the Front Range.

"Though we do not know when or how much vaccine we may receive, we are staging the freezers and organizing logistics so we'll be ready to begin vaccinating certain health care workers and high risk individuals," the spokeswoman said.

A Kaiser spokesman confirmed the healthcare system was making similar preparations.

The good news is other vaccines, like Moderna's, don't need to be kept as cold as Pfizer's. That means more healthcare providers can handle them.

"There are providers in every county of Colorado capable of storing these vaccines," the state's plan reads.

3. Colorado already has a vaccine distribution network.

Colorado has an extensive infrastructure in place for managing vaccines. It's called the [Colorado Immunization Information System \(CIIS\)](#).

The state uses it for delivering all sorts of vaccines every year, including the flu vaccine.

According to the state's plan, the CIIS will serve as a "backbone" for delivering COVID-19 vaccines to the public. That includes everything from ordering, distribution, redistribution, inventory management, administration documentation, safety monitoring and second dose reminders. (Yes, the vaccines require [two doses](#)).

4. Health care workers are first in line.

Once the first shipments of vaccines arrive in Colorado, they'll be reserved for a select group of health care workers, first responders and high-risk residents of assisted living and nursing home facilities. The state's plan refers to this group as "phase one." Around 200 health care providers will take part in vaccinating this group.

As supply increases (likely next spring), Colorado will move into "phase two" of vaccination, which includes adults living in close quarters and certain essential workers. Examples include college students living in dorms, ski industry workers and people experiencing homelessness.

Anyone who is 65 or older or will get access to the vaccine at this stage as well. More hospitals and pharmacies will be enrolled in the process. People with certain health conditions such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease are also lumped in this group.

Finally, when vaccines are readily available, adults 18-64 without high risk health conditions can get vaccinated.

Dr. Eric France, the state's chief medical officer, said Coloradans should be patient because later phases likely won't come until next spring or summer.

"I look to the vaccines as a light at the end of the tunnel," France said. "But for me the tunnel might not be until March, and for many of us, it may be until the spring. So, while we're making our way towards the end of the tunnel, we need to be practicing the right behaviors to reduce, as much as we can, this pandemic."

5. It could take up to a year to reach herd immunity.

Colorado has more than 5 million residents. For the state to reach herd immunity, which would significantly slow the disease's spread, well above half of the state's population needs to be vaccinated.

That means Colorado's public health restrictions, including mask mandates and reduced business capacity will last well through 2021, said Diana Herrero, interim deputy director at CDPHE helping oversee the state's distribution plans.

"COVID is still rapidly expanding in our state," Herrero said. "Even when we start vaccinating, we will still need to do that."