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A message from our medical director

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COVID-19 Hasn't Gone Away

As I write this, Legacy is well into its first day of administering COVID-19 vaccinations. I feel today much like I did on the day I received my own first dose of vaccine—incidentally excited and grateful for this step to move us toward the end of this pandemic. My goal in writing today is to share some words of encouragement as well as some words of caution. The encouragement is that, with the widespread availability of vaccines, the end of the pandemic is in sight, but the caution is that it isn't over yet.

First, my caution: there are several variants of COVID-19 that are much more contagious and dangerous than the original, and one of them, the UK variant, already has an established presence in Louisiana and Texas. This variant has the potential to infect many people much more quickly and more seriously, meaning that, even this far into the pandemic, there is potential to have a more dangerous wave than we have ever yet seen. While vaccines will eventually make things safer for us all, not enough people have been vaccinated for that to be the case yet. Social distancing, mask wearing, and hand washing are more important right now than ever before, and if we don't do those things, we will pay for it dearly in the coming weeks to months. I hope to be able to stop issuing such warnings soon, but at the present time, please believe me when I say this warning must be heeded urgently. I know no one wants to hear it, but the truth is that we are in more danger right now than at any time in the past.

The words of encouragement I have are to say that, with the widespread availability of safe and highly-effective vaccines, the end of the pandemic is in sight! We can't stop running before crossing the finish line, but as in any race, the very sight of the finish line should cheer us up and encourage us not to stop. Many of us have suffered the loss of friends or loved ones, or have endured symptoms from COVID-19 that long outlasted the actual infection, or have known disruption of travel, gatherings, sports, and so many other events that we usually enjoy; and while vaccines won't restore what we have lost, they will do a great deal to counteract the disruption and allow us to resume something more normal in our lifestyles and in our economy. And most importantly, the vaccines will protect many people from suffering serious or long-term illness, or from dying of COVID-19.

Effectiveness

Let me share a few words of encouragement specifically about the vaccines. Although many people understandably have had some hesitation about them, partly because of the speed of their development, the bottom line I can tell you today is that, with all the information that's been collected after more than 470 million doses have been given worldwide (an astonishing number), including over 130 million doses in the U. S., it's hard to overstate how safe and beneficial the vaccines are: they vastly reduce the risk of any infection with COVID-19, and they almost eliminate the risk of being sick enough to be hospitalized or to die from COVID-19. Yes, some side effects from the vaccine are fairly common, especially soreness at the injection site or fever, and occasionally these are very uncomfortable; but the risk of a serious reaction is very low – about 1,000 times less likely than dying if you are infected with COVID-19. Some who are hesitant to get the vaccine express concern about long-term side effects, which is also understandable. Generally speaking, nearly all reactions to vaccines become apparent within minutes to hours of receiving a vaccine; and now, considering that the first trials started during the summer of 2020, we have a great deal of reassuring data demonstrating that longer-term side-effects are not a significant problem with the vaccines.

There is no risk-free decision in life. There are risks of *not* being vaccinated to consider in addition to the risk of vaccination. Let's compare a million people who receive a COVID-19 vaccine against a million people who do not get vaccinated. Then let's imagine that over some period of time, 30% of the unvaccinated people become infected with COVID-19; we would expect about 1,500 deaths. During that same period of time, we would expect only about 1.5% of the vaccinated group to get infected, and nearly zero deaths, with about five people experiencing serious but treatable allergic reactions. All things considered, the numbers we have strongly confirm that the potential benefits of the vaccine far outweigh the risks.

The end of the pandemic is in sight. We have the tools to bring it to an end, but we can't give up before we finish. Please wash your hands, socially distance, wear a mask, and when you can, get vaccinated. If you still have questions about vaccines, please ask a trusted, knowledgeable, licensed professional!

Louisiana Governor Jon Bel Edwards announced that, effective Monday, March 29, all individuals 18 years old and up (16 and up for the Pfizer vaccine) are eligible for COVID-19 vaccination. This is another important and exciting step forward for us all!