

The Coronavirus Crossroads: the Vaccinated, the Stymied and the Waiting

Frustration and at times, resentment among those struggling to get a shot, and tempered elation on the other side of the divide.

By Jennifer Steinhauer

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For a vast majority of Americans, a coronavirus vaccine is like sleep for a new parent: It's all you can think about, even if you have no idea when you will get it.

People are scrolling through perpetually crashing websites at 3 a.m., or driving 150 miles each way in the snow. Others are lining up at grocery stores for hours on end, hoping to snag a leftover shot, or racing to hospitals amid rumors of extra doses.

Many more are tossing in bed in the dark, praying that tomorrow will be their mother's lucky day.

A small portion — [about 11 percent](#) — have received one or two shots of the vaccine, leaving the nation in a medical and cultural interregnum. Some of those with only one shot are in a precarious limbo, in states snarled over second-dose distribution.

Byzantine rules setting up tiers of the eligible mean most will be holding their collective breath for months down the road, as another set moves gingerly toward the restoration of their lives on the other side of the divide.

"I've been struck with the outpouring of grief and loss that the obstacles to getting the vaccine has generated," said Niti Seth, 73, a psychologist and department dean at Cambridge College in Boston.

She has been unable to get a vaccine appointment, despite spending all hours of the day and night online reading and clicking. "A glimpse of the possibilities of reclaiming our lives has led, paradoxically, to a more palpable sense of what we had to give up," Ms. Seth said.

Debates over masks, indoor eating, testing availability and school reopenings all now center on a single axis: the lagging rollout of the vaccine.

It is the alchemy of "unrelenting waves of exhaustion, fear, hope, uncertainty and pandemic fatigue," said Lindsey Leininger, a health policy researcher and a clinical professor at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth in Hanover, N.H. "I stay focused on the lotus mud metaphor

and think about how gosh-darned beautiful we are all going to be when we come out the other side.”

Still, although cases and hospitalizations continue to decline, and as the pace of vaccinations picks up, some Americans — including those now vaccinated and ostensibly protected — are approaching the spring and summer with quite a bit of trepidation. The divide is still quite wide between the haves and the have-nots, and many fear that even a vaccinated nation and world won’t restore a sense of safety or security.

Weeks into the rollout, there are stories of [heroism](#), supreme luck and perseverance, and those of [ignominy](#), and widespread [inequality](#). Some post their injections and vaccination cards on social media, while their friends and neighbors contemplate a spring of double masking, a tool in the race between vaccines and the new, more contagious variants of the virus snaking their way across the nation. The [Nextdoor](#) website has become an outpost for sightings of vaccination sites, as neighbors rush to refresh their browsers. There are tales of [resentment](#) and stories of [guilt](#).

Marsha Henderson has become a bit of a shot whisperer with her friends in Washington D.C., after securing doses for herself, her husband and their 40-year-old daughter who works in health care. Many of the sites on the city’s websites turned out to not have any vaccines, so she realized she needed to only check times for grocery stores. She gamed out times to recheck. “You have to have the ability to be on a computer in the middle of the day and sit there,” said Mrs. Henderson, who is 71. She became so good at it, an ambassador’s wife called her for tips.

Still, she said, her second shot on Wednesday, “won’t change my behavior.”

“I am more comfortable with the Comcast man to fix my computer, and there is some rain damage I need to get fixed,” she said. “But I will be doing carry out and outdoor dining probable for another year, in part because we don’t know the variants.”

In New York, Jamie Anderson emailed a nonprofit group in northern Manhattan on behalf of her father, Jimmy Mattias, who is 66. “The nonprofit called me on Tuesday to get his details,” said Ms. Anderson, who lives in the Bronx, not far from her father in Washington Heights in Manhattan. “He was called on Wednesday to confirm an appointment, and Thursday morning he had his first dose. It was so fast, I truly couldn’t believe it.”

Mr. Mattias, who works as a manager at a storage center, said extra efforts had been made to vaccinate people his age, but he had no intention of making the effort on his own because he feared missing work. “She’s my daughter, and she is looking out for me,” he said.

His co-workers and bosses are all younger, jealous yet thrilled for him, while friends his age are skeptical. “Some don’t think the system was designed to create a vaccine that quickly,” he said. “I tell them this is not the 1800s, things happen faster. Let’s face the facts, this is a horrible situation.”

Catherine Sharp, a freelance photographer in Brooklyn, like many New Yorkers, has had less luck. Ms. Sharp, 26, relocated to Illinois recently to help her parents, a relocation that has developed into a part-time job trying to get shots for her father, 67, who has been living in Katonah, N.Y., and her mother, 65, in Morris, Ill.

“It was like a sneaker drop,” she said. “You are not going to get the Off-White sneakers. It’s just impossible.” As she waited, both she and her mother contracted the virus, and her mother, a cancer survivor, was hospitalized.

“This is my worst nightmare,” Ms. Sharp said. “I know some of my mom’s friends have gotten it. I just don’t understand the algorithm. A good 40 percent of my time is spent on this. I wake up, I get my coffee and say, “I gotta do this.””

For a few of those at the back of the line — largely younger, healthier people who are working from home — luck and perseverance can pay off in a split-second, sometimes with a side of guilt.

Darla Rhodes lives in Pasco, Wash., is 47 and works remotely for a start-up. Even though she has diabetes, she did not think she would be getting a vaccine anytime soon. But when the assisted living center where her grandmother lives offered vaccines to residents, and some of them refused them, the vaccinators had 30 minutes to get those shots in people’s arms or supplies would perish. Her sister, who happened to be dropping off groceries for their grandmother, got the ball rolling.

Ms. Rhodes likened the sudden access to flying standby. “It was utterly unexpected,” Ms. Rhodes said. “But I jumped in the car, drove 15 minutes, filled out some paperwork and got a shot.” After posting about her experience on Facebook, she said, “One person said, ‘Hey I can’t even get a shot for my grandma,’ and my response was it was either that or it goes to waste.” Doug Heye, a Republican consultant in Washington, D.C., had heard about the trick of lining up at grocery stores, in the hopes of getting any remaining doses that were not used for residents [given high priority](#), like those ages 65 and older, or frontline and essential workers.

“The more needles we get into arms, the faster we can move past this,” Mr. Heye, 48, said. “That applied to me, personally, as well.”

So he recently positioned himself at his local Giant supermarket at 5:15 a.m., where he found himself second in line in the pharmacy section. “I spent nine hours in a grocery store. Lunch was

beef jerky and barbecue potato chips. It is too bad they don't have the vaccine at Whole Foods or Balducci. It was like camping out for Bryan Adams tickets back in the day, and there's no V.I.P. line or anything like that."

At the end of a long day staring into other people's grocery carts, he and four others drew the last doses.

"Obviously, it's a flawed process, and there can and should be better ways of doing this like letting seniors register for any extra doses first, for instance," he said. "But that's just not happening. I wasn't cutting in a line, no V.I.P. concierge nonsense, didn't call in any favors."

Mr. Heye said he was considering how to get his life back, scanning Facebook for friends who had received their two shots so that they could resume some semblance of a social life.

Those with two shots — just over [2 percent](#) of the total population as of Sunday — at this point essentially live alone on private islands. Some may be in professions like health care where many of their co-workers are also inoculated. Others are in a sort of suspended animation, more comfortable at a grocery store or hugging a grandchild, yet still waiting for the rest of the nation before they swim ashore.

"I feel very fortunate to have already received both doses of the Moderna vaccine," said Pamela Spann, 68, who lives in Daingerfield, Texas. When the only pharmacy in her county offered shots in the last week of December, she was first told that she was too young to get the first dose. But a clerk did write down her name in a notebook. "I was so surprised when I was called that evening for an appointment the next day," Ms. Spann said. She received a second dose on Jan. 26.

Having missed out on her first year of retirement travel, Ms. Spann is waiting for others in her circle to get shots. "I am most looking forward to visiting my family again," she said. "I also look forward to visiting and playing games with friends."

Still, she and many others who have been vaccinated or developed antibodies by contracting the virus feel a sense of trepidation. "I think life will never be as carefree as life before," Ms. Spann said. "I will be more aware of new viruses throughout the world and what they might mean to me."

Mr. Mattias, of New York, described himself as a loner who, because he worked every day, said he hadn't felt that deprived over the past year, beyond missing a trip with his wife to a Cracker Barrel restaurant on their annual vacation in Pennsylvania.

“I am looking forward to spending time with my grandkids, walking my dog and not having to cross the street so people don’t have to walk away from me first,” Mr. Mattias said. “My mother is 89 years old, I haven’t hugged in a while, so that’s another one. Really, my whole life is little things. I am counting on getting them back.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/08/health/covid-vaccines-rollout.html>