

Health News: November 28, 2021

- Proctor & Gamble (P&G) is recalling **Old Spice** and **Secret** antiperspirant aerosol spray products due to the presence of benzene, a known carcinogen. Check here for a complete list of product lot numbers, which have expiration dates thru September 2023.

[FDA recall notice](#)

- Blistex Inc. is recalling **Odor Eaters aerosol spray products** due to the presence of benzene, a known carcinogen. Foot powder and insole products have not been recalled.

<https://www.odoreatersrecall2021.com/en-US/Home/Recall>

- **CVS** announced it will close **900 stores** within the next 3 years, beginning in spring 2022, representing about 1 in 10 of its locations. The list of locations has not been announced. CVS attributes the reasons for the closings to shifting populations and changes in customers' shopping preferences.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2021/11/18/cvs-store-closings-cvs-pharmacy/8664870002/>

- Researchers at Indiana University and the University of Central Florida found that investors who made decisions during their "stronger" **circadian time** frame made the **best decisions**, while worse decisions were made during the "wrong" times for them. Those with a circadian process shifted earlier in the day are known as larks, while owls are more alert later in the day, and the third group of individuals is the intermediate. The study appears in the *Journal of Business Venturing*.

<https://www.ucf.edu/news/dreaming-of-being-an-investment-shark-better-figure-out-if-youre-an-owl-or-a-lark-study-finds/>

- Commonly taken drugs, including NSAIDs for pain and corticosteroids like prednisone, can raise **blood pressure**. Pharmacist Joe Graedon discusses some of the medication and food culprits that may make it more difficult to manage hypertension.

<https://www.peoplespharmacy.com/articles/common-medications-that-raise-blood-pressure>

- Ever wonder what's going on when you get **itchy skin**, whether from a rash or medication or some other bodily reaction? Also why do antihistamines that are used to stop itch cause our mouths to be dry? Scientists at the UNC School of Medicine and the University of California at San Francisco conducted research showing in precise detail how chemicals bind to mast cells and cause skin to itch. "Our work provides a template for the design of new anti-itch medications," said a lead researcher. The study was published in *Nature*.

<https://news.unhealthcare.org/2021/11/researchers-reveal-structure-of-itch-receptors-on-cells/>

- Many **herbs and spices** may contain heavy metals like lead, arsenic, and cadmium that could be harmful if taken in large quantities. *Consumer Reports* tested various spices from different brands and found that some types were more likely to contain heavy metals than others. Types with lower concentrations were black pepper, coriander, curry powder, garlic powder, saffron, sesame seeds, and white pepper. Ginger and oregano tended to have higher amounts of arsenic and heavy metals. The results suggest that **brand names** are not a good way to screen for the "safer" spices, since test results varied widely among particular brands' products, including higher priced organic products.

<https://www.consumerreports.org/food-safety/your-herbs-and-spices-might-contain-arsenic-cadmium-and->



Pharmacy Benefit Managers' Role in High Drug Prices

- The House Committee on Oversight and Reform held a forum to examine the role **Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs)** play in pharmaceutical markets. Speakers included pharmacists, academics, and healthcare providers who described how PBM business practices are driving community and independent pharmacies out of business, driving up prescription drug costs, and making it difficult for some patients to obtain needed treatments.

<https://republicans-oversight.house.gov/release/pbm-forum-wrap-up-greater-transparency-further-congressional-review-needed-to-lower-drug-prices>

- The three largest PBMs — **CVS Caremark**, Cigna Corp.'s **Express Scripts** and UnitedHealth Group Inc.'s **OptumRx** — processed 77% of all prescription claims in 2020, according to research by *Drug Channels*.

<https://www.drugchannels.net/2021/04/the-top-pharmacy-benefit-managers-pbms.html>

- Unfortunately, the topic of PBMs' influence on **drug prices** has become a partisan one for reasons not always understood. Investigative reporter Marty Schladen provides highlights from the House forum.

<https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2021/11/26/congressional-group-takes-up-pbms-strikes-a-partisan-tone/>

- The powerful lobbying organization for senior citizens, **AARP**, is not vocal on the topic of PBMs, because it is largely funded by United Healthcare, which owns OptumRx, one of the largest PBM companies in the U.S. However, AARP has been an advocate for allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical companies in the "Build Back Better" spending bill that is now in the Senate.

https://www.realclearmarkets.com/articles/2021/03/11/the_aarps_unholy_alliance_with_insurance_companie_s_767611.html#!

- Several **startups** have emerged that might eventually disrupt the PBM industry by increasing competition and providing new options for state governments and employers and patients that are frustrated with climbing drug prices:

1. **Prescriptive Health** launched a non-traditional PBM and no-coupon-required price comparison service with a blockchain-powered prescription data platform. CEO Chris Blackley takes issue with coupon programs such as offered by **GoodRx**, which, he says, depend on **existing PBM contracts** and take a cut of their fees while not being completely transparent with prices. "The system is fundamentally broken," said Blackley.

<https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/payer/startup-aims-to-be-a-no-compromises-pbm-but-market-may-take-convincing>

2. **Mark Cuban Cost Plus Drugs PBM** plans to market to large employers and public entities through direct outreach. It will begin bidding for clients next year before becoming operational in 2023. It will share 100% of the rebates it receives from drug makers as well as the details of its operating costs. The company promises to make back only its costs plus a 15% margin. (Mark Cuban will also soon open an online pharmacy that sells 100 commonly prescribed generic medications. It will charge customers a flat 15% markup plus a \$3 dispensing fee.) *Update, January 2022: the online pharmacy is now open to consumers.*

<https://www.dallasnews.com/business/health-care/2021/10/26/mark-cubans-drug-company-promises-to-lower-costs-with-launch-of-benefit-management-business/>

3. **Emsana Rx** is a **nonprofit PBM** set up in conjunction with the for-profit Purchaser Business Group on Health (PBGH), a coalition of about 40 large private and public employers including Walmart, Disney, Costco and Microsoft. Emsana Rx will provide employers with a fixed price per prescription and guidance from a dedicated pharmacist/account manager who can consult with employers on designing pharmacy networks and updating formularies.

<https://accessmarketintell.com/2021/11/01/transparency-continues-to-drive-new-pbm-initiatives/>

- The independent (no connections to industry) **Patients for Affordable Drugs** web site provides a template that U.S. consumers can use to send an email message directly to their Senator requesting that provisions that lower drug prices, including allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices with manufacturers, stay in the "**Build Back Better**" bill. The message can also be personalized to include other concerns, such as support for safe personal drug importation* or the need for tighter regulation of PBMs by eliminating certain PBM practices that make drug prices higher.

<https://action.patientsforaffordabledrugsnow.org/a/lower-drug-prices-202108-medicare-negotiate>

*Read more about efforts to allow for safe prescription drug importation: <https://personalimportation.org/cppi-statement-on-house-passage-of-build-back-better-rxdrug-package/>



Covid-19 News

- A **newly emerged coronavirus variant** has been designated a "variant of concern" by the World Health Organization. Called **Omicron**, it has more than 10 mutations and may be more contagious than the Delta Variant. It was first reported by South Africa to the World Health Organization on Wednesday. Some nations, including the U.S. have or will institute travel bans from countries with emerging levels of cases. On two flights from South Africa to Amsterdam on Friday (November 26) more than 61 out of 600 passengers tested positive for Covid-19 and 13 of them tested positive to the Omicron variant.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59451103>

Variant surveillance in the U.S.: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/index.html>

- BBC health and science correspondent James Gallagher explains how SARS-CoV-2 mutations can lead to **new variants**, and why this one is so unusual compared with previous variants. Because of the level of mutation, experts say Omicron most likely came from a single immunocompromised patient who was unable to beat the virus. Experts also say that there have been many examples of variants that have seemed scary on paper, but came to nothing. The doctor in South Africa who reported the case to WHO says that patients infected with the variant so far have had **mild symptoms**, and that half the cases were among vaccinated and half among unvaccinated individuals.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-59418127>

- Vaccine makers are already studying how effectively current vaccines resist the new variant; they say they can **tweak the current vaccine** in a matter of weeks if necessary.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55659820>

- A Northwestern University study that analyzed the antibodies of 33 vaccinated healthy adults over time found that booster shots led to antibody levels that were greater than those of who had had Covid-19 followed by two vaccines. The preliminary results also suggest that the **booster shots led to a longer period of antibody-mediated immunity**.

<https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2021-11-27/protection-offered-by-booster-shot-beats-natural-immunity>

- CDC Director Rochelle Walensky endorsed the CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices' (ACIP) expanded recommendations for **booster shots** to include **all adults ages 18 years and older** who received a Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine at least six months after their second dose.

<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s1119-booster-shots.html>

Covid-19 Statistics

Cases & Testing

The average U.S. 7-day average daily case load is on the rise, with an average 94,266 cases a day as of November 23, compared with 85,927 average cases a day as of November 16. The average percentage of COVID-19 NAATs (nucleic acid amplification tests) that are positive (percent positivity) for the week ending November 21 was 6.13%. Two weeks ago, the positivity rate was 5.82%.

https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_positivity7day

Vaccines

As of November 23 (the CDC has not been updating the statistics due to the Thanksgiving holiday), 80.3% of those age 12 and up have received at least one vaccine, while 69.1% of those age 12 and up are fully vaccinated. Approximately 13% of children age 5 to 11 received a vaccine (about 3.6 million children). 42.1% of people age 65 and older have received a booster dose and 99.9% of people age 65 and up have received at least one vaccine, according to the CDC.

https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations_vacc-people-onedose-pop-12yr

Deaths

Covid-related deaths are declining in the U.S., with a 7-day average of 982 deaths per day as of November

23, compared with 1,399 average daily deaths as of November 16.

Ask a Patient® Health News

https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_dailydeaths

New Hospitalizations

The 7-day daily average number of new hospitalizations of patients admitted to a hospital who also tested positive for Covid-19 for November 19 – November 25 2021 was 5,813. This is a 1.5% increase from the prior 7-day average (5,738) from November 12 – November 18, 2021. The age group with the largest increase was patients in the age range of 60-69 (a 3.8% increase) and patients in the age range of 0 -17 had a decrease in hospitalizations of 6.5%, with 144 new hospitalizations a day on average. Age 70 and over only had a .4% increase in the number of hospitalizations.

<https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#new-hospital-admissions>

Global Cases

Globally, the numbers of weekly COVID-19 cases and deaths have increased for more than a month. During the week of 15-21 November 2021, nearly 3.6 million confirmed new cases and over 51,000 deaths were reported, reflecting a **6% increase for cases and deaths as compared to the previous week**. The European Region reported an 11% increase in new weekly cases, while the other regions reported a decrease or incidence similar to the previous week. The largest decrease was reported from the South-East Asia Region (11%), followed by the Eastern Mediterranean Region (9%).

<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-epidemiological-update-on-covid-19---23-november-2021>

Have you received your Covid-19 booster shot? Click to read comments about these Covid-19 vaccines and/or add your experience:

[Pfizer](#) [Moderna](#) [Janssen](#)

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Do you think the U.S. 3-month investigation into the origins of the coronavirus was thorough enough?

Vote in Ask a Patient's quick poll

Contact with questions, comments, and suggestions: admin@askapatient.com

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