TuSalud

RFK Jr. Said Everybody Can Get a COVID Vaccine. Is That True?

People under 65 might need a doctor's prescription to get the shot, and they may have to pay out-of-pocket.

September 11, 2025 By Grace Abels, Maria Ramirez Uribe and PolitiFact

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When health secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. testified before the Senate Finance Committee on September 4, several senators criticized him for restricting the COVID-19 shots after promising in November he wouldn't "take away anybody's vaccines."

"Did you hold up a big sign saying that you were lying when you said that?" Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) asked Kennedy.

On August 27, the FDA updated its COVID vaccine guidance, limiting the groups of people approved to get the updated shot to anyone 65 or older and any person at least 6 months old who has at least one underlying health condition that increases their risk of a severe covid infection.

Kennedy pushed back. "Anybody can get the booster," he said, later adding that "it's not recommended for healthy people."

Warren said, "If you don't recommend, then the consequence of that in many states is that you can't walk into a pharmacy and get one. It means insurance companies don't have to cover the $200 or so cost."

Warren and Kennedy continued to speak over each other, debating the vaccines' availability.

"It depends on the states," Kennedy said. "But they can still get it. Everybody can get it. Everybody can get it, senator."

Asked for evidence, the Health and Human Services Department pointed to an August 27 post on the social platform X from Kennedy that said, "These vaccines are available for all patients who choose them after consulting with their doctors."

Kennedy's blanket statement to senators is misleading and premature.

Under current guidance, healthy people under 65 might need a doctor's prescription to get the

shot. If they successfully get a prescription, they may need to pay out-of-pocket.

Further, whether the vaccine is available at pharmacies and covered by insurance is largely dependent on a vaccine panel that has so far issued no recommendations.

What was the status quo for years — that most Americans, regardless of age, could easily make an appointment at their local pharmacy for the vaccine at little to no out-of-pocket cost — is no longer guaranteed in the 2025-26 season.

Limited Approval, No Guidance

The FDA's approval is not the only step in the process of making vaccines available to the public.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, a panel of independent experts that guides vaccine policy, has not voted on or issued current guidance. Typically, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] recommends vaccines based on the panel's guidance.

And that guidance affects insurance coverage and vaccine access. Federal law requires that most health insurance plans fully cover vaccines recommended by the CDC. Some states also require these recommendations before they allow vaccines to be offered over-the-counter at pharmacies.

On June 9, Kennedy fired all 17 members of the CDC's immunization advisory committee and replaced some with new members, many of whom have expressed anti-vaccine views. CDC director Susan Monarez was fired August 27 over what Monarez described as a dispute about vaccine policy.

According to the CDC's website, the advisory panel is scheduled to meet Sept. 18 to 19.

Access Varies by State

People in the FDA-approved groups should be able to schedule vaccinations as soon as authorized health care providers receive supplies, likely in the next few weeks.

Even if you are in these approved groups, where you can get a COVID shot varies by state. By law, pharmacies in certain states won't be able to offer the vaccine or will administer it only with a doctor's prescription until the CDC's vaccine advisory panel issues its recommendations.

That means despite the FDA having issued its approval for some groups, in 18 states and Washington, D.C., "pharmacists cannot administer it because it isn't on the CDC immunization schedule yet," Brigid Groves, the American Pharmacists Association's vice president of professional affairs, previously told PolitiFact.

As of September 4, the scheduling apps for Walgreens and CVS notified patients in some locations that they could not schedule a COVID vaccine appointment because of state restrictions, inventory, or the need for a prescription.

‘Off-Label’ Prescriptions

People not in the FDA’s approved group are not banned from getting a COVID vaccine, per se. But accessing the vaccine will likely require navigating barriers.

Doctors can legally prescribe a COVID vaccine for people who fall outside the FDA categories.

That’s true for adults and children — and the practice of prescribing medications and vaccines for “off-label” use is fairly common in pediatrics, William Schaffner, a Vanderbilt University Medical Center professor of infectious diseases, previously told PolitiFact.

That requires making and paying for a doctor’s appointment, and finding a doctor willing to prescribe it off-label.

Depending on ACIP’s guidance, pharmacists might be able to vaccinate people not in an FDA-approved group through a process called “shared clinical decision-making.”

That means, for example, “if you were 52 years old and otherwise healthy, but you nonetheless wanted to get the vaccine, you could discuss that with your doctor — shared clinical decision-making — and you could receive the vaccine,” Schaffner said.

Pharmacists are considered clinicians who can conduct shared decision-making, Groves said.

But again, without CDC recommendations, “we don’t know if that provision is still there,” Schaffner said.

Waiting on the CDC

Insurance coverage for the vaccine is still up in the air, too, and will largely depend on what the CDC recommends.

Insurance coverage is more probable for people in an FDA-approved category. But, if the CDC recommendations include giving vaccines to healthy people through the shared clinical decision-making process, insurance companies will generally honor that, Schaffner said.

COVID vaccines cost about $142, according to the CDC’s price lists. It’s unclear whether that would be the out-of-pocket cost for patients receiving a COVID vaccine not covered by insurance.

Our Ruling

Kennedy said “everybody can get” a COVID vaccine.

The FDA limited the groups of people eligible for the COVID vaccines, which has already diminished the shots’ drugstore availability in some states. People who are not in those groups aren’t banned from getting a shot, but are likely to face additional barriers. For example, people may need a doctor to prescribe the vaccine “off-label,” making the process more challenging and

potentially more costly.

Kennedy's blanket statement also is premature.

A CDC vaccine panel has not issued recommendations for the vaccines. The group's guidance might affect insurance coverage and over-the-counter access.

The statement contains an element of truth — the vaccine has not been banned and some people are approved to get it. But it ignores critical facts about the barriers others could face in accessing and paying for it. We rate it Mostly False.

PolitiFact staff writer Madison Czopek contributed to this report.

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This story was published by KFF Health News on September 10, 2025. It is republished with permission.

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