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COVID-19 pill Paxlovid is available in Central Florida. Why aren't eligible people taking it?

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Orlando, FL

Apr 28, 2022 at 6:00 am

Shortly after Kamala Harris announced a positive COVID-19 test on Tuesday, [her press secretary shared](#) on Twitter that the Vice President had taken Paxlovid at her doctor's order. Harris is an exception to the norm.

The government and doctors say people aren't taking the drug.

The initially scarce antiviral is "underutilized" across the U.S., [said Dr. Anthony Fauci](#), the White House's chief medical adviser, earlier in April. The Biden Administration on Tuesday [announced that the country](#) had ordered 20 million more courses of this treatment, was offering it to more pharmacies and was focused on increasing availability and education about this drug.

In Central Florida, experts worry that many people eligible for Paxlovid aren't taking it.

"Paxlovid availability seems to be increasing, but it is still underutilized for several reasons," said Elena Cyrus, an epidemiologist at the University of Central Florida, in an email.

Paxlovid works by preventing COVID-19 from replicating inside the body. It's available by prescription to people 12 and up with conditions that put them at higher risk of severe COVID-19 such as being obese or immunocompromised.

A clinical trial found a five-day course could reduce the risk of hospitalization or death from COVID-19 by nearly 90%, [according to the FDA](#). There are interactions with other medications and potential side effects — an impaired sense of taste, diarrhea, high blood pressure and muscle aches — but doctors only prescribe the drug to their patients if they determine potential benefits outweigh risks.

The drug is available at over 300 Walmart, CVS, Sam's Club and Walgreen's pharmacies in and around Orlando, according to a [COVID-19 treatment locator](#) provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, but just because there's ample supply doesn't mean the pill is accessible to everyone who needs it, said Cyrus.

To get the pill, people need to test positive for COVID-19, get a prescription, and pick up that prescription within five days.

"With people being busy with work... not to mention provider availability and getting an appointment with a doctor — adhering to the five-day window is not always possible," Cyrus said.

Dr. Tim Hendrix, medical director of AdventHealth Centra Care, said he has not observed issues with access to the pill, but he has seen patients unwilling to take it. He's recommended Paxlovid to several patients, the same at-risk groups he would have recommended monoclonal antibodies for in the past when they were more widely available.

Some patients have turned him down when recommended Paxlovid.

"They don't want to get tested again, they're not interested in medications or treatments. It's a different attitude about COVID-19 right now," he said. "People are just over... COVID-19. There's no longer that fear of being hospitalized from it."

Right now, Florida's hospitalizations are at some of the lowest levels the state has seen throughout the pandemic. In Orange County, there were 59 confirmed COVID-19 admissions from April 18 to 24, according to [HHS](#), which considers this number low.

Yet, relaxing now would be a mistake, said Hendrix. He noted Centra Care's positive COVID-19 cases have been slightly increasing recently, and he believes the real number is not known because so many people are taking free at-home tests and not coming to the doctor.

People need to take the virus more seriously, he added.

"We have to be very careful because we don't know who's going to end up in the hospital," he said. "We don't know if the variant is going to change and it's going to increase in severity. This is not a done deal that the next variant is going to be less severe."

Hendrix thinks uptake of Paxlovid could potentially be improved if Centra Care is given the ability to dispense it. Right now, doctors can prescribe it, but the drug is picked up at a separate pharmacy, and the additional visit may deter patients.

A one-stop-shop that offers COVID-19 tests, a prescriber, and the drug is called a Test-to-Treat location. There are less than 30 Test-to-Treat locations in Central Florida, almost all CVS and Walgreens pharmacies. The Biden Administration on Tuesday said more federally supported Test-to-Treat sites would be added in the coming weeks.

Of course, if no one comes in for tests, they can't take advantage of this service.

"I think the bigger problem is getting people in to get tested to begin with," Hendrix concluded.

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