

Adolescents and young teens, now eligible, rush to get vaccinated



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Dr. Debby Pollack (left) talks to Miriam Araya (right), 15, and her mother Betty Kidanu and sister Melina Araya, 11, after Miriam received a first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at Dekalb Pediatric Center on Wednesday, May 12, 2021. More than a thousand patients, most of them 12-15 years old, seized the opportunity to get a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at the clinic, which is partnering with the city school system to vaccinate students. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

A line of adolescents and their parents stood in the drizzling rain outside a Decatur pediatricians' office Wednesday, awaiting their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

Parents of more than a thousand children aged 12 to 15 seized the opportunity for their children to get a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at the DeKalb Pediatric Center, which partnered with the local city school system. For many, the pinprick was the first ticket on a journey to freedom after more than a year of life in lockdown.

"I haven't really been able to do anything. I haven't gotten to hang out with my friends," said Rozzie Anderson, 15, a sophomore at Decatur High School who had just gotten a shot with her younger brother, Matthew, 13. Rozzie's cheery outlook contrasted with the overcast sky: She was thinking about the sleepaway camp that both are planning to attend this summer, seeing cousins for the first time in more than a year.

Their mom, Catherine, was looking forward to sending them into classrooms in the fall. "I'm so thankful that the kids can get back to life as we knew it," she said.

The Georgia Department of Public Health said on Tuesday that any vaccine provider enrolled in the state to use Pfizer could immediately begin administering it to those aged 12-15 after [Monday's emergency use authorization for that age group by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#). The state is working to enroll pediatricians in the vaccine program and did not say how many now have Pfizer doses, but kids this young can go anywhere an adult can for the Pfizer vaccine, the only one authorized for minors.

The government-operated mass vaccination site at Mercedes-Benz Stadium had already started jabbing adolescents Tuesday. Dr. Jane Wilkov, the founder of the DeKalb Pediatric Center, said many patients who were scheduled for doses at her facility Wednesday were so eager that they took their children to the stadium Tuesday and canceled with her at the last minute. The state reported a preliminary count of 33 shots administered on Tuesday in Fulton County, the location of the stadium.



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May 12, 2021 Decatur - Lucy Saravia, 13, and her mother Robin Mead (left) celebrate after Lucy received a first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine from Pheona Mack (right), RMA, at Dekalb Pediatric Center on Wednesday, May 12, 2021. More than a thousand patients, most of them 12-15 years old, had seized the opportunity to get a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at the clinic, which is partnering with the local school system to vaccinate students. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

Most parents will likely be taking their kids to pharmacies and government-run sites in the near term because manufacturers are not yet set up to deliver vaccines at the smaller, more manageable scale required by many doctor's offices.

The Pfizer vaccine has been delivered in trays of 1,170 doses. It must be stored in ultra-cold freezers over the long term, and since many facilities don't have such freezers, they would have just over two weeks to use the doses when storing in a normal freezer.

Administering that many doses over such a short timeframe would be difficult for a typical pediatrician's office, said Dr. Hugo Scornik, a pediatrician in Conyers and Georgia president of the American Academy of Pediatrics. A DPH spokeswoman confirmed the agency was working on delivering doses in more manageable sizes and said some providers will get smaller allotments as soon as this week.

On Wednesday afternoon, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's vaccine advisory panel recommended the use of Pfizer with 12- to 15-year-olds. Hours later, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky officially adopted the recommendation, completing the federal review process of the Pfizer vaccine for now.

The committee's unanimous vote came after presentations from scientists. They concluded that data so far show the benefits of the vaccine for children outweigh the risks.

Scientists who presented the trial results to the committee Wednesday said that among the 1,131 adolescent children in the study who had received the Pfizer vaccine, many experienced no reaction. Among those who did, the reactions were similar to those experienced by older teenagers. The most common were temporary fatigue and headaches.

Experts say they are reassured by the safety data from that research and from the data from vaccinating millions of 16- and 17-year-olds, for whom the vaccine was authorized in March.

Two [pediatric infectious disease experts with the Emory University School of Medicine addressed safety concerns](#) in an online talk Tuesday, saying they would give the Pfizer vaccine to their own children.

There are about 1,800 students enrolled in grades 7 through 10 in Decatur, so a substantial portion of that population is on track for second doses and the fullest possible immunity by late June, well ahead of the next school year.

Decatur schools Superintendent Maggie Fehrman said last week that she [was anticipating a fall reopening](#) that will be much closer to normal than last fall, with more students in classrooms, less social distancing and the removal of most of the transparent cough shields around desks.

Any sense of normalcy will be delayed for elementary schools, though. Pfizer-BioNTech has announced it plans to file for emergency use authorization for its COVID-19 vaccine in ages 2 to 11, but not until September.

The rush to immunize 12- to 15-year-olds in Decatur may prove to be a blip in a much slower rollout among the state's adolescents. The city has many parents who work at the CDC and in medical or

research roles at Emory University.

Vaccine uptake has been slower in other parts of Georgia with less trust in the science behind this vaccine. Georgia is well behind other states in vaccination of adults, and polling shows widespread hesitancy among parents nationally.

In a [Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#) of parents with kids aged 12 to 15, 23% said they would not get their child vaccinated. The national poll, taken in the second half of April, also found that another 18% would only vaccinate them if their school required it, and 26% were in wait-and-see mode. Less than a third were eager to vaccinate their child.

Public health officials say vaccinating children is important both for their own safety and for the overall fight against the pandemic.



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May 12, 2021 Decatur - A line of adolescents and their parents stood in the drizzling rain outside Dekalb Pediatric Center awaiting their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine in Decatur on Wednesday, May 12, 2021. More than a thousand patients, most of them 12-15 years old, had seized the opportunity to get a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at the clinic, which is partnering with the local school system to vaccinate students. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

The full embrace of the Pfizer vaccine by Rossie and Matthew Anderson in Decatur was perhaps understandable. Their dad, Dr. Evan Anderson, is an associate professor of pediatrics and medicine at Emory, and has been involved in clinical trials of COVID-19 vaccines.

Betty Kidanu, another mother at the DeKalb clinic Wednesday, described herself as conflicted. Her daughter, Miriam Araya, 15, wants to go to a summer sleepaway camp. Kidanu was concerned about vaccine safety but wanted to let her daughter go to the camp without fear of infection.

“It was not easy to make the decision,” she said.