

Third Dose



I did not doubt the necessity, or my eligibility, to get a third COVID-19 vaccine. After all, the drug manufacturers had reported waning effectiveness of their initial dosages. The MS Center neurologists treating me strongly recommended, as did the National MS Society, that some of us living with multiple sclerosis would be wise to get the booster.

But recalling the challenges in early 2020 of obtaining the first vaccine, I was hesitant. New York's Javits Center, where I received my first two doses of the Pfizer inoculation in February, had shut down the large vaccination site run by New York State in July. Where should I go?

A POD (point of dispensing) operated by the City of New York had opened in April near my apartment. Lines of people waiting for their first and second doses made it a distinctive, and encouraging, sight, giving some hope that more New Yorkers would be vaccinated. My wife and I often passed this site on the way to a neighborhood restaurant at the other end of the long street.

But after the initial waves of individuals seeking vaccines at this location wound down, there were many evenings we passed by a greeter standing at the open entrance, where we could see inside several nurses sitting at tables alone, with no one waiting outside.

After hearing that boosters were becoming available, I asked the door greeter if the POD has them. She said yes and invited me in to get one if I'm eligible. I explained I qualify, but would return another day soon. No appointments necessary. Walk-ins very welcome.

I walked-in on the following Sunday when the POD opened, figuring that the waiting period time would be short, and I would have time to deal with any side effects before going to work on Monday. "Do you qualify" for a third dose, a greeter at the entrance inquired. I immediately explained I have multiple sclerosis, told her I have a letter from my doctor, and began to take it out from my pocket, but she said it was not necessary to see it.

The Long Island City POD offers all approved and authorized vaccines – Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson. I was escorted to a table labeled Pfizer where a nurse reviewed my vaccine card, verified other personal details on a laptop, and asked several times which of the listed categories supported my eligibility. Underlying medical conditions was the last one on the list shown to me. I again offered my doctor's letter, but responding verbally to all questions sufficed.

What a contrast from my first vaccine experience at the start of the year, going back to January 2021.

It was a time of high anxiety and uncertainty, with the sounds of ambulances blaring around the clock, with confusing instructions about who exactly was eligible and when. Both the New York State and New York City online systems to schedule appointments were inadequately functioning.

I knew I was eligible. Governor Cuomo had said, and the media had reported, that those with compromised immune systems qualified. But the online sites and forms had not been updated to reflect his guidance. The computer ruled me ineligible after I answered a battery of questions concerning qualifications for select criteria. MS, other autoimmune diseases, was not included.

I resorted to the telephone next. It took enormous patience and tenacity to call the hotline for scheduling vaccines and, after a long wait, speak with an informed and empathetic human being. My wife, concerned and eager to secure an appointment to get a shot in my arm, took the lead late one night. The hotline person asked many questions, but was finally convinced after checking with a supervisor that I was indeed eligible. I received an email confirmation for my appointment on February 4, 2021 with a QR code. This time, however, I was also cautioned to bring a doctor's letter explaining why I should receive expedited access to the COVID-19 vaccine.

While the vast Javits Center, which had the potential to vaccinate as many as 20,000 people a day, was well set up, and the medical staff and National Guard soldiers very friendly and attentive, it still was nerve-wracking to arrive at the designated time, wait in line for admission, and go through the questioning at check-in. At any moment I feared being told there was an error in my registration, that I actually was not entitled to a vaccine at this time, and be shown the exit.

At check-in, the RN noticed in the appointment notes on her computer that I have MS and

asked to see my doctor's letter which I immediately handed over. She read it carefully and handed it back. My neurologist had written that I am treated with "a disease modifying agent that results in an immunocompromised state" and thus should receive the COVID-19 vaccine to avoid the potential impact on my MS condition from the coronavirus infection.

For my second dose at the Javits Center, the entire process of checking in and receiving the shot was very smooth. I certainly was less nervous. An RN stopped by the station where I was about to get the shot to say she understood I have MS and advised me that I would feel this one more than the first dose. I was thankful that, as with the first, I was getting this done on a Friday afternoon, since during the rest of the weekend, as it turned out, I felt deeply fatigued.

The third time was a charm in mid-September. The entire process went much smoother than I could have expected. After waiting 30 minutes in the waiting area following the shot, a nurse walked up to me and said I can leave. I grabbed an extra bottle of water on the way out.

It is enormously frustrating that only 64% of New Yorkers have been fully vaccinated to date, when now it is so accessible and simple to get the shots. I'll continue to wear a mask, as much as needed, indoors and outside, and take other precautions to keep distance from others, as anyone should, to guard against catching the virus.

For a person living with MS since 1990, the extra layer of protection I gained with a third dose is comforting.

Editor's Note: For more information on COVID-19 vaccines and MS, visit the [Society's coronavirus resources page](#).

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is proud to be a source of information on multiple sclerosis related topics. Unless otherwise indicated, the information provided is based on professional advice, published experience, and expert opinion. However, the information does not constitute medical or legal advice. For specific medical advice, consult a qualified physician. For specific legal advice, consult a qualified attorney.