



Rochelle Walensky, now the CDC director, speaks during an event in Wilmington, Del., in a December 2020 file photograph. (Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images)

VACCINES & SAFETY

CDC Director: Nobody Said COVID-19 Vaccine Effectiveness Might Wane

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A Print

When COVID-19 vaccines were first authorized in late 2020, the public wasn't informed that the touted effectiveness might decline, a top U.S. health official said on March 3.

Dr. [Rochelle Walensky](#), the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, recalled watching coverage of clinical trial results that indicated the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine was 95 percent effective.

“So many of us wanted to be helpful. So many of us wanted to say, ‘Okay, this is our ticket out, right, ‘now we’re done.’ So I think we have perhaps too little caution and too much optimism for some good things that came our way. I really do. I think all of us wanted this to be done,” Walensky said.

“Nobody said ‘waning’; ‘Oh this vaccine is going to work, oh well, maybe it’ll wear off.’ Nobody said, ‘Well, what if the next variant, it’s not as [effective] against the next variant,” she added.

Walensky, who was speaking at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, was tapped to head the [CDC](#) on Dec. 8, 2020, by then-president-elect Joe Biden. Three days later, U.S. regulators authorized the Pfizer jab. That same month, they cleared Moderna’s shot.

Both those vaccines and the only other COVID-19 vaccine available in the United States, made by Johnson & Johnson, were initially promoted as highly effective in preventing infection from the virus that causes COVID-19. Pfizer’s was said to be 95 percent effective in preventing infection.

“Vaccination is a critical tool in bringing this unprecedented pandemic to an end,” Dr. Robert Redfield, Walensky’s predecessor, said in a statement before leaving office.

“We know for sure that the vaccine is highly efficacious in preventing the clinical disease,” Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said on CNBC around the same time.

While authorizing the shots, the Food and Drug Administration acknowledged it could not determine how long the vaccines would provide protection.

The vaccine effectiveness has dropped over time, and [provides little protection](#) against infection, according to data released after the Omicron virus variant became dominant in the country in late 2021.

“Just about everybody” will get COVID-19 because of Omicron, [according to Fauci](#).

Still, Fauci, Walensky, and other U.S. officials continue to recommend virtually all Americans aged 5 years or older get a vaccine and get a booster, asserting the protection against severe disease, which [is also waning](#), is reason enough.

On Thursday, Walensky also said that she was not sure if a second booster of the vaccines will be required while alleging some people have drawn the wrong conclusions about public health guidance during the pandemic.

“I have frequently said, ‘We’re going to lead with the science, the science is going to be the foundation of everything we do.’ That is entirely true,” she said. “I think the public heard that science is foolproof, science is black and white, science is immediate, and we get the answer and then we make the decision based on the answer. And the truth is science is gray, and science is not always immediate, and sometimes it takes months and years to actually find out the answer. But you have to make decisions in a pandemic before you have that answer.”