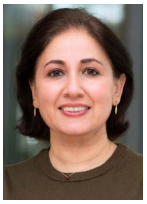
MAY 2022

OVERCOMING COVID-19

WHAT SCIENTISTS KNOW AND WHAT POLICY CAN TELL US

Q&A WITH THE EXPERTS

Emergency doctor and policy researcher Dr. Mahshid Abir talks about what science says about stopping the spread of COVID-19, and why policymakers sometimes don't listen



DR. MAHSHID ABIR is an emergency physician and director of the Acute Care Research Unit at the University of Michigan and a health services policy researcher at the RAND Corporation. Inspired by her work as a doctor, Dr. Abir researches how health care workers can make sure that people with severe injuries and illnesses receive the best care available in the ambulance, the emergency room, and the hospital. She has assisted the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in developing policies to help hospitals cope with surges of sick people. Dr. Abir received her M.D. from the University of Cincinnati.

Why did you choose to be a medical doctor *and* a policy researcher?

First, I wanted to serve people and help make them healthier. So, I pursued my medical degree. Then I realized that public policies are one of the most powerful ways that we can create healthy change for all people. So, I decided to conduct policy research. The two jobs really complement one another.

What kinds of COVID-19–related public policies exist?

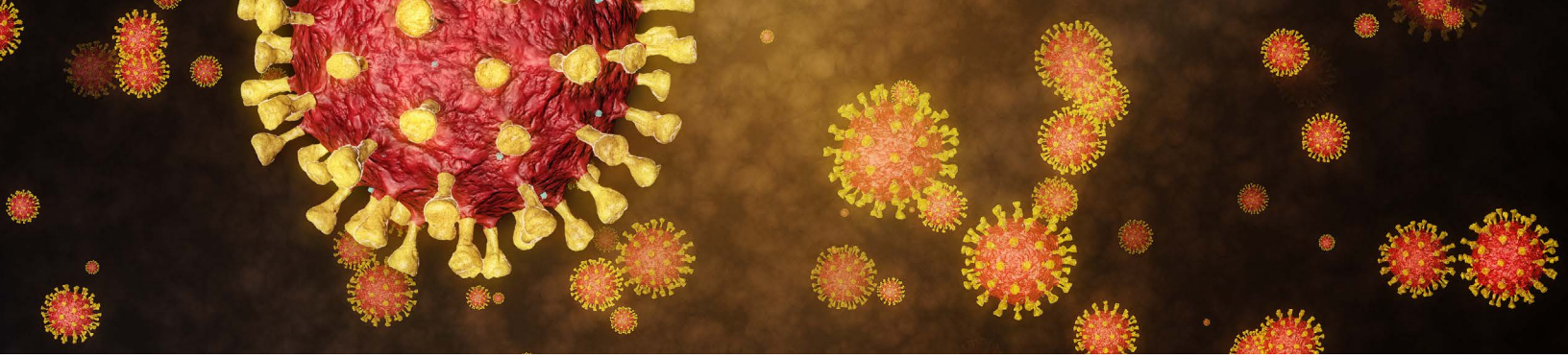
Many COVID-19 public policies are designed to keep the public safe. Masks, vaccines, and testing for COVID-19 are methods that have been proven by science to work. Because of this, they are featured in many COVID-19–related policies—but policies are changing all the time. Some businesses require people to wear masks indoors. Some businesses require their staff to be vaccinated. Others require staff to take regular COVID-19 tests, especially if they are not vaccinated. Some schools require students, staff, and teachers to be vaccinated and tested regularly.

How do masks help prevent COVID-19 from spreading?

Masks create a barrier between you and other people and the virus. If you have COVID-19 but are wearing a mask, you are less likely to spread the virus to others. If someone else has the virus, you will be less likely to catch it from them. For a mask to work, it needs to closely cover your nose and mouth. Also, some kinds of masks filter the virus out of the air better than others. The masks called "N95" and "KN95" have been shown to protect people from COVID-19 better than cloth masks do.

How do the COVID-19 vaccines work?

When your body encounters a virus, it develops a way to fight the virus. But sometimes this process can take a while. Part of the COVID-19 vaccine looks like the COVID-19 virus to your body, and it teaches your body how to attack the virus. This happens before you come into contact with the real virus. In other words, the vaccines prepare your immune system to fight the actual virus if it comes into your body.



Where can we get up-to-date information about COVID-19 as scientists learn more about it?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization websites have science-based, reliable information.

Why do different places have different policies?

What policies you follow depends on where you live. For example, in spring of 2022, the state of Illinois requires school employees to get vaccinated. But the state next door, Wisconsin, does not require vaccines for school employees. Why is this? Most policymakers are thinking about what the people in their community want in addition to what science tells us about the virus and its risks to human health.

What do you think policymakers should be thinking about when they are writing policies related to COVID-19—or other pandemics—in the future?

There are many policymakers involved in pandemic prevention and response. They include school district leaders and people at city hall, as well as people working at the state and national levels. All of them can help do one big thing: make sure that people are getting correct information in a way they can understand. Not everyone can understand a medical study. Not everyone wants to read one! But the information in the research is important. Policymakers at every level should also update public information regularly as we learn more about the pandemic. Our knowledge is changing all the time.

You mentioned that our knowledge about COVID-19 is changing all the time. In early 2022, when you are writing this, what do we know about COVID?

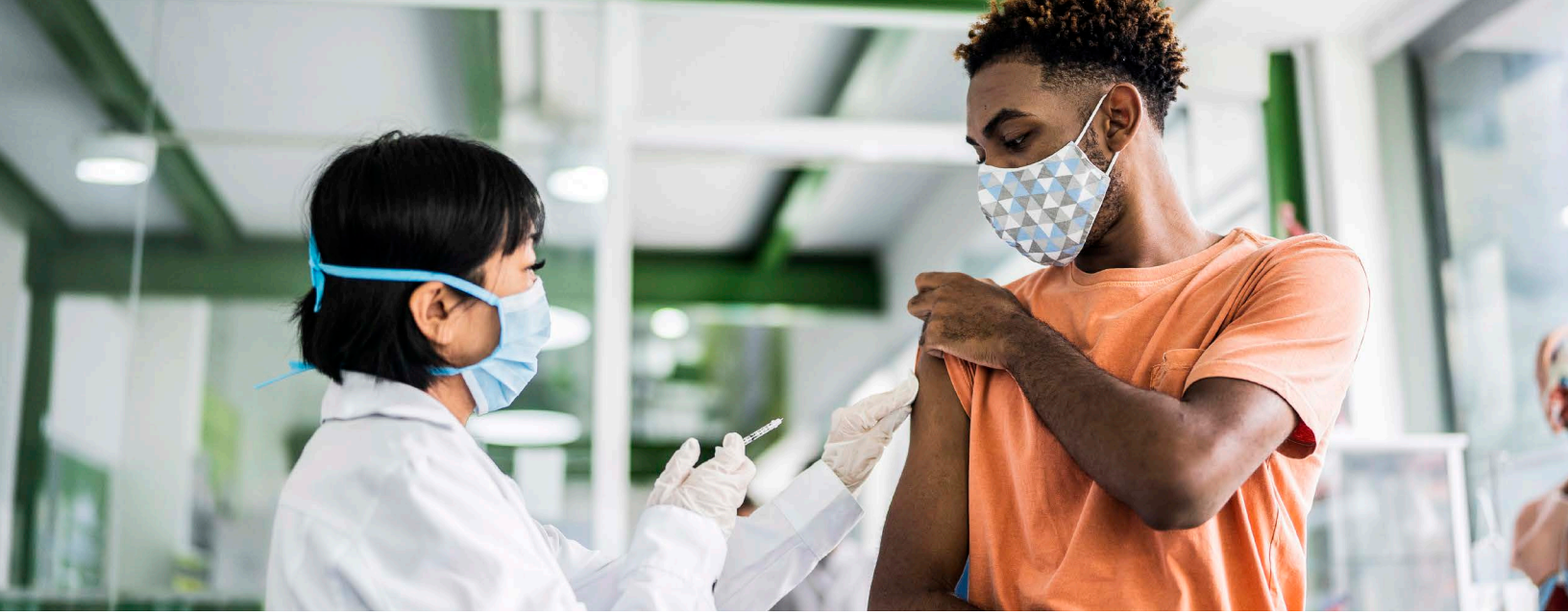
We have gone through a few different outbreaks, including those caused by the Delta and Omicron variants of COVID-19. At this point it is not 100-percent clear if COVID-19 has become endemic—like the common cold or influenza—which means people will need to get vaccinated against it yearly. In other words, it's not clear if the pandemic is over or not. Luckily, we have vaccinations and know that masks, hand-washing, and social distancing work if there are more outbreaks.

What would you still like to learn about COVID-19?

I would like to know what kinds of long-term effects COVID-19 has on the human body. We know about what COVID-19 does when we get infected with it. For example, you may get a fever, cough, or sore throat. However, we do not know whether COVID-19 does anything to our bodies that will affect us over months and years after we recover from the infection. Some people seem to show symptoms for a long time after their bodies have fought off the disease. Other people seem to get healthy right away. Why is this? We are still researching the answer.

What is one surprising thing that you have learned in your research about health care policy?

I have learned that research and policy can be at odds with each other, even during a global pandemic. For example, the best research that we have right now tells us that wearing masks can protect everyone from contracting COVID-19. However, not all communities require masks because some people do not want them. This is an example of how research and policy can sometimes move in different directions. This clash can lead to policy decisions that are not in the best interest of our communities' health.



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This tool describes work documented in *Engaging Youth with Public Policy: Middle School Lessons to Counter Truth Decay*, by Andrea Prado Tuma and Alice Huguet, TL-A387-1, 2022 (available at www.rand.org/t/TLA387-1). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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