

Did Pfizer Pay NFL Star \$20M to Push Covid and Flu Double-Jab?

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November 21, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Pfizer reportedly paid Kansas City Chiefs' star Travis Kelce \$20 million to promote "two shots in one go" – a double jab of COVID-19 and a flu shot
- › The advertisement aired during a "Sunday Night Football" match, showing Kelce engaging in two activities, like grilling hamburgers and mowing the lawn, at once, before flashing two Super Bowl rings and saying, "Two things at once"
- › A smiling Kelce is then pictured with two Band-Aids on his arm, a blue one representing Pfizer's COVID-19 jab and another for the flu shot
- › On Instagram, Kelce continues to play the part of Pfizer spokesperson, using the hashtag #PfizerPartner and promoting "this season's updated COVID-19 shot"
- › In addition to Kelce, Pfizer also partnered with other celebrities to promote COVID shots and other treatments, like its COVID drug Paxlovid. Among them are singers Pink, John Legend and Questlove; actor Jean Smart; celebrity chef Martha Stewart and Olympic gold medalist swimmer Michael Phelps

With hardly any Americans signing up to receive the updated COVID-19 shot, Pfizer is pulling out all the stops to increase uptake. The Big Pharma giant reportedly paid Kansas City Chiefs' star Travis Kelce \$20 million to promote "two shots in one go"¹ – a double jab of COVID-19 and flu shot.

The advertisement aired during a “Sunday Night Football” match, showing Kelce engaging in two activities, like grilling hamburgers and mowing the lawn, at once, before flashing two Super Bowl rings and saying, “Two things at once.” A smiling Kelce is then pictured with two Band-Aids on his arm, a blue one representing Pfizer’s COVID-19 jab and another for the flu shot.²

Pfizer Tries Celebrity Endorsement to Save Failing COVID-19 Shot

Pfizer is undoubtedly hoping to piggyback off Kelce’s sudden increase in popularity after being spotted with pop star Taylor Swift. Kelce already earns a reported \$5 million a year from endorsements, including for McDonald’s, Papa John’s, Walgreens, Nike and Tide.³ But Pfizer’s \$20 million payment makes that look like peanuts. On Instagram, Kelce continued to play the part of Pfizer spokesperson, writing:⁴

“With my schedule, saving time is key. The CDC says you can get this season’s updated COVID-19 shot when you get your flu shot if you’re due for both. That’s why I got two shots in one stop! Ask your doctor or pharmacist if it would be right for you. You can also visit CDC’s [vaccines.gov](https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines) to learn more and schedule an appointment.”

The Instagram announcement included the hashtag #PfizerPartner and states that it’s a paid promotion for Pfizer. Fierce Pharma reported:⁵

“Pfizer, along with rival mRNA COVID vaccine maker Moderna, has experienced a decline in COVID booster uptake this year ... the New York-based pharmaceutical company is seeking to revitalize booster vaccinations. They are clearly counting on the star power of Kelce and the convenience of being able to receive both a COVID booster and an annual flu jab during the same visit to entice more people.”

Pfizer is no stranger to celebrity endorsements. In addition to Kelce, it’s also partnered with several other big-name artists and athletes to promote COVID shots and other

treatments, such as its COVID drug Paxlovid. Among them are singers Pink and Questlove, actor Jean Smart and Olympic gold medalist swimmer Michael Phelps.⁶

Do Celebrity Endorsements Work?

At least one news outlet suggested that Pfizer's attempt to lure Kelce's fans to line up like lemmings for a COVID-19 shot may be futile. Citing a review published in *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*,⁷ which suggests motivating changes in health behaviors is not an easy task, STAT reported:⁸

"The result of the costly ad: The celebrity reinforced the action of those who were already going to do the behavior, entrenched those even more who were against the behavior, and was ignored by those who were the actual focus of the commercial in the first place. Indeed, the promo did nothing to boost Pfizer's bottom line. The pharma company lost more than \$2 billion in the third quarter due to lackluster sales of their Covid products."

But others suggest celebrity endorsements work to increase sales and raise brand awareness – otherwise, why would companies continue to use them? Celebrity endorsement for prescription drugs is only legal in the U.S. and New Zealand, but in these two countries it's regarded as a promising marketing tool. Dividend forecasting firm Woodseer highlighted Novo Nordisk's success in hiring celebrities to peddle its wares:⁹

"Celebrity promotion of Novo Nordisk's top diabetes medication illustrates how celebrities contribute to financial well being of pharmaceutical companies but also signal the beginning of the new pharmaceutical endorsement era whose rules are yet to be established."

Rapid sales and revenue growth boosted by celebrities' involvement in Novo Nordisk's marketing in the last two years coincides with its interim dividend growth which has increased by 42% since 2021."

Novo Nordisk's "skinny pills" Ozempic and Wegovy have also been boosted by celebrities, with Woodseer noting, "Ozempic and Wegovy's current thriving and forecasted stable growth has been mostly influenced by two events: accreditation resulted from trustworthy clinical trials worldwide and an increased demand due to successful celebrity endorsement."¹⁰

Beyond Kelce, Pfizer has also enlisted the help of other celebrities to push its COVID-19 jabs. In an ad campaign titled, "Got Yours?" it features singers John Legend and Charlie Puth, soccer player Megan Rapinoe and celebrity chef Martha Stewart, all sporting the blue Band-Aid, indicating they've received Pfizer's COVID-19 jab.¹¹ But it will likely take far more than celebrities to change the dismal outlook for COVID-19 shots, as the market rapidly dries up. According to Fierce Pharma:¹²

"Pfizer announced during its financial results for the third quarter it recorded a \$5.6 billion charge for coronavirus-related inventory write-offs, as well as other charges, plus a \$4.2 billion revenue reversal tied to the planned return of some 7.9 million Paxlovid doses from the U.S. government.

As a result of dwindling sales of its COVID franchise and these write-offs, Pfizer is looking to make drastic cuts worth \$3.5 billion in annual costs by the end of 2024, including \$1 billion expected this year."

Big Pharma Spends Massive Amounts to Market Their Meds

The marketing of prescription drugs, health services, laboratory tests and even disease awareness is big business in the U.S., and spending has been on a steady uphill climb since 1997. That year, spending on medical marketing was \$17.7 billion, which rose to \$29.9 billion in 2016.¹³

Direct-to-consumer (DTC) spending increased the most rapidly, from 11.9% of total spending to 32%. DTC prescription drug ads accounted for \$6 billion in spending alone in 2016, which amounted to 4.6 million ads, including 663,000 television commercials, mostly for high-cost biologics and cancer immunotherapies.

Disease awareness campaigns, meanwhile, are actually marketing campaigns run by pharmaceutical companies geared at diseases treated by their drugs. Such campaigns rose in numbers from 44 in 1997 to 401 in 2016, with spending increasing from \$177 million to \$430 million over the same period.

DTC marketing for health services also rose from \$542 million to \$2.9 billion, with spending increases particularly notable for hospitals, dental centers, cancer centers, mental health and addiction clinics and medical services, such as home health care.¹⁴

Aside from DTC advertising, Big Pharma is still marketing directly to health professionals – an area that accounted for the most professional spending, according to a JAMA study on medical marketing in the U.S.¹⁵

Again, only the U.S. and New Zealand allow DTC advertising of prescription drugs. And a disturbing study published in JAMA Network revealed that drug companies spend more to advertise drugs with lower clinical benefits to patients than those with higher added clinical benefit.¹⁶

Meanwhile, health agencies in France and Canada rate prescription drugs, helping consumers to understand how one drug performs compared to alternatives on the market. This isn't done in the U.S., but when researchers used French and Canadian data, they found 92 of the 135 top-selling prescription drugs in the U.S. offered patients low added benefit.¹⁷

Only 7.1% of Adults Have Received the Updated COVID-19 Shot

Pfizer is likely desperate to boost sales of its ailing COVID-19 shot. About four weeks after the September 2023 rollout of the updated 2023-24 COVID-19 shot, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released data from its National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD) National Immunization Surveys (NIS). NIS are telephone surveys conducted by NCIRD in order to monitor vaccination coverage.

The data, which were presented to a CDC advisory panel, revealed “abysmal” uptake, as CDC vaccine adviser¹⁸ Dr. Camille Kotton of Harvard Medical School put it,¹⁹ with only 7.1% of adults and 2.1% of children receiving the updated COVID-19 shot as of October 14.²⁰ The survey reported that 24.6% of adults said they “definitely will” get the shot — conflicting with the actual numbers who did — while 37.6% said they “probably or definitely will not get vaccinated.”

Further, 37.7% of parents said they “probably or definitely will not get their child vaccinated,” compared to 33.8% who said they “definitely will” get their child the shot.²¹ The media has blamed the low uptake partly on the shift to the commercial market. The CDC’s COVID-19 Vaccination Program was discontinued by October 3, 2023.²²

While celebrities promoting the jabs are now being given ample airtime, those who have suffered side effects from the shots continue to be silenced. It’s always important to evaluate the source of the information and the potentially \$20 million in motives behind it when deciding whether it’s valid — and think for yourself before choosing to have any medical procedure.

At the very least, it’s possible Pfizer’s use of Kelce could backfire, as it’s opened up a dialogue with New York Jets quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who did not receive a COVID-19 shot and has spoken openly about it. Rodgers mocked Kelce, referring to him as “Mr. Pfizer.”

Though it’s true that Rodgers plays for the Jets, which is owned by Woody Johnson, of pharmaceutical company Johnson & Johnson fame, he’s indicated a willingness to have an open conversation about the shots with Kelce. And open debate is ultimately what’s needed to prompt change in the industry. Speaking with “The Pat McAfee Show,” Rodgers said:²³

“I made a tiny little joke about a guy shilling for a potentially ... corrupt company and everybody kind of loses their minds. Mr. Pfizer said he didn't think he would be in vax war with me. This ain't a war, homie. This is just conversation.”

But if you want to have some sort of duel, debate, have me on the podcast, come on the show, let us have a conversation ... I'm going to take my man RFK Jr., independent, and he can have, you know, Tony Fauci or some other pharmacrat and we can have a conversation about this."

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