COVID-19 Vaccine: Making the Decision

As vaccines for COVID-19 become available, you may soon be faced with the decisions of whether and when to be vaccinated. As you weigh these choices, it can be helpful to ground yourself with reliable information about the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccines in general.

What are the benefits of getting the COVID-19 vaccine?

- **Protect yourself.** COVID-19 is a highly contagious illness with a risk of long-term, debilitating effects or death. By getting the vaccine, you will significantly reduce your risk of getting COVID-19 and of getting seriously ill or dying from the disease.

- **Protect the people around you.** Vaccines for other diseases have the effect of protecting not just the person who gets the vaccine, but the people who are close to them and the community at large. Experts expect the COVID-19 vaccine to have this same protective effect:
    - By getting the vaccine, you are helping to protect the people you love and others in your community who are at a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. This includes older adults and people with certain underlying health conditions.
    - You are also helping to protect people who can't yet get the vaccine. This includes, at least in the early stages, children and people who have had a severe allergic reaction to one of a vaccine's ingredients.

What are the risks of getting the vaccine?

To gain approval for use, vaccines must go through extensive and rigorous clinical trials to be sure they don't present a health risk that might outweigh their disease-prevention benefit. Each of the COVID-19 vaccines approved for use has been through trials with tens of thousands of volunteers, who have had their health status monitored after getting vaccinated. Two months of postvaccination monitoring was required for initial emergency-use authorization, and the monitoring in each trial continues for six months with additional reporting requirements.

Once each vaccine is approved for use, additional monitoring is done of vaccine recipients, providing even more information on safety and effectiveness. A small number of the initial vaccine recipients, for example, experienced immediate allergic reactions to the vaccine, prompting a change in vaccine recommendations and procedures. People who have had a severe allergic reaction to any of a vaccine's ingredients are advised not to get that vaccine, and all vaccine recipients are to be monitored for 15 minutes after their injections.

The 2020 vaccine trials did not include children or pregnant women, so data on vaccine safety for these groups will come later. Some of the trial participants became pregnant during the course of the trial with no ill effects. Based on that limited data and experience with vaccines for other diseases, the initial emergency-use authorization allows women who are pregnant to choose to get the vaccine, balancing their risk of exposure to the virus against the uncertain risk

from the vaccine. The experience of these women will provide additional safety and effectiveness data over time.

Who should not get the COVID-19 vaccine yet?

Guidance on who should not get the COVID-19 vaccine and who should consult with their doctor before getting the vaccine will likely change as more clinical trials are completed and the experiences of more vaccine recipients are tracked and reported. In early 2021, it is recommended that the following groups *not* get the COVID-19 vaccine:

- **Children**—Vaccines have been tested on adults and older teenagers (from age 16 for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and from age 18 for the Moderna vaccine). Clinical trials have not yet been completed for children. Follow the guidance of your doctor as to when it is safe to have children vaccinated and with which vaccines.

- **People who have had severe allergic reactions to the vaccine's ingredients**—If you have had a severe allergic reaction to any of the ingredients in a particular vaccine, you should not get that vaccine. A history of severe allergic reactions to food, insect bites, oral medication, or other triggers is not considered a reason to avoid the vaccine. It may, however, warrant extra precautions in monitoring immediately after the injection.

Who should talk with their doctor before getting the COVID-19 vaccine?

If you have any concerns about getting the COVID-19 vaccine, you should talk with your doctor. Your doctor will have current information on the different vaccines' benefits and risks and your specific health issues. Your doctor can also help you weigh those benefits and risks in the light of your life and work situation. If your work or living situation exposes you to a greater risk of COVID-19 infection, that might tip the scales in favor of earlier vaccination. If you can isolate yourself and minimize the risk of exposure, that might incline you toward waiting and getting the vaccine a bit later.

Specific groups who should consult with their doctor before getting vaccinated include:

- **Pregnant women**, who must balance the increased risk of serious illness from COVID-19 against the more limited early data on vaccine safety.

- **People with compromised immune systems**, who must balance the risk of serious illness from COVID-19 against the possibility that the vaccine may not trigger a sufficient immune response to provide protection (This might be the case, for example, for people undergoing chemotherapy for certain types of cancer.)

What else should you know about the COVID-19 vaccine?

The COVID-19 vaccine is given at no cost to you. The vaccine dose is paid for by the government. Any costs for administering the vaccine will be covered by your insurance plan or by a government fund (the Health Resource and Services Administration's Provider Relief Fund).

The COVID-19 vaccine has been shown in clinical trials to have the same effectiveness and safety results for people in different racial and ethnic groups.

The vaccine will not give you COVID-19. Each of the different vaccines works by triggering an immune response to specific elements of the virus, not to the whole virus in weakened form.

The COVID-19 vaccine may cause short-term side effects, including fatigue, muscle pain, joint pain, or headache. These side effects, which may feel similar to having a mild case of the flu, are caused by your body's immune response to the vaccination and are a sign that the vaccine is working.

It will not protect you from COVID-19 forever. The disease and vaccine are still too new for researchers to have studied how long immunity will last. When that is known, and if COVID-19 continues to spread in the community, you may need to get another vaccination to renew your protection.

After getting the vaccine, you will still be advised to follow recommendations to protect yourself and others from COVID-19, including physical distancing and wearing a face mask when outside of your home. Combining the vaccine with these other public health measures will provide you and others with the greatest protection from the virus.

As the COVID-19 vaccines become more broadly available, rumors and misinformation are likely to circulate about them. This is already happening, with false stories that the vaccines contain microchips, for example, or that they can alter your DNA. (No microchip could fit through the fine syringes used in vaccinations, and the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna do not affect the body's DNA.) As you seek out information on the vaccines, make an extra effort to find credible sources with information based on facts, medical knowledge, and scientific research.

For More Information

"COVID-19 Vaccines," U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

"Understanding mRNA COVID-19 Vaccines," CDC

"COVID-19 Vaccines: Get the Facts," Mayo Clinic

"Not Sure About the COVID-19 Vaccine? Get the Facts, Then Decide," Michigan Medicine, University of Michigan

Morgan, H. (2020, December; Revised 2021, January [Eds.]). *COVID-19 vaccine: Making the decision* (C. Gregg-Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.