



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the COVID-19 Vaccine- Information for Veterans and VA Employees

COVID-19 Vaccines: The Basics

- Vaccines teach the immune system how to recognize and fight off the virus that causes COVID-19, which can prevent vaccinated people from getting sick. Vaccines are not used to treat people while they are sick with COVID-19.
- There are currently two vaccines available in the VA Healthcare System – one made by Pfizer and one made by Moderna. (A third vaccine, made by Johnson and Johnson, has just been approved (on February 25, 2021) by the Food and Drug Administration but is not yet being distributed widely in the U.S.)
- The Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are **94-95% effective** at preventing illness due to COVID-19.
- The vaccines have now been given to millions of people and have a strong safety record.
- While the vaccines were developed in record time, they have gone through all the same steps that any vaccine goes through before it can be used. These steps are called clinical trials.
- Both vaccines have two doses, either three weeks apart (Pfizer vaccine) or four weeks apart (Moderna vaccine).
- The vaccine is given as a shot in the upper arm.

Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe? Should I be worried that the vaccine was made so quickly?

- Both vaccines were found to be safe and effective in tens of thousands of adults (including Black and Latinx people) who were part of high-quality research studies – the same research that any new vaccine or medicine must go through before being approved.
- Both vaccines were reviewed faster than normal, but this is because the review process was prioritized. The COVID-19 vaccines went to the front of the review line because so many people are getting sick and dying of COVID-19 and it's a national emergency. Also, the drug makers don't usually start making new drugs, including vaccines, until all the tests to make sure they're safe and effective have been completed. With this vaccine, they took a chance and started making the vaccine before the trials were over because so many people were getting sick and dying from COVID-19. Once the trials were completed and showed that the vaccines were safe and effective, the vaccines were distributed right away.
- Both vaccines have been authorized for emergency use by the FDA (Food & Drug Administration) and the California Department of Public Health.
- In the U.S. alone, more than 47 million people have now received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/covid-19-vaccine-doses.html>)

Won't I be part of an experiment if I get the vaccine?

- No, the trials to test the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are over. Several months ago, Veterans and VA employees of the San Francisco VA were asked if they wanted to participate in vaccine trials, but those trials are now completed. The Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are now approved for the general population.

Has anyone died as a result of the COVID-19 vaccine?

- No one has died from the COVID-19 vaccine, but over 500,000 Americans have died from COVID-19.

What are the possible side effects of the vaccine? Should I be worried?

- The most common side effects of the vaccine are arm soreness, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, joint pain, and fever. These side effects are more common after the second dose of the vaccine and – if they occur – usually go away within 2 days.
- These symptoms are **normal**, and they are a sign that your body is building protection against the virus that causes COVID-19.
- Among the millions of people who have now received the vaccine, a very small number of people have experienced severe allergic reactions to COVID-19 vaccines. If you have ever had a severe allergic reaction to a vaccine or other substance in the past, you should discuss this with the health care professionals giving you the vaccine.

The COVID-19 vaccine is an mRNA vaccine. Does that mean it changes your DNA (also called your genetic code)?

- The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines both use “messenger RNA” (also called mRNA) which acts like a blueprint to teach the cells in your body to recognize the outside part of the COVID-19 virus. That way, if you are exposed to COVID-19, your immune system will recognize COVID-19 and stop the virus from making you sick.
- The COVID-19 vaccine **does not change your DNA**. mRNA is not the same as DNA, and it cannot combine with your DNA to change your genetic code. When the mRNA has done its job of teaching your immune system how to fight the COVID-19 virus, your body excretes it.

Can I get COVID-19 from the vaccine?

- No. Because of how the vaccine works, **it is impossible to get COVID-19 from the vaccine. The vaccine does not contain the live COVID-19 virus.** However, the vaccine prevents 94-95% (and not 100%) of COVID-19 cases. Even if you have been vaccinated, if you have a cough, fever, or other symptoms, then there is a chance you could have COVID-19, and you should seek medical care.

I have hepatitis C or HIV. Is it safe for me to get the COVID-19 vaccine? Is there anyone who should not get the COVID-19 vaccine?

- Yes. It is safe for people with hepatitis C and HIV to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. There are only two groups of people who should not receive the vaccine: (1) those who had a severe allergic reaction to the first dose of the vaccine, and (2) those who have had a severe allergic reaction to any of the ingredients in the vaccine [mRNA, lipids, cholesterol, salt and sucrose (sugar) and a few other ingredients].

Should I get the vaccine if I have a chronic disease like diabetes, heart disease, obesity or an auto-immune problem and I take medication for these conditions?

- Yes, you should get the vaccine. People with these chronic diseases are more at risk of getting really sick or dying if they contract COVID-19. You can also get the vaccine if you take medications or dietary supplements.

Is it safe to get the vaccine if I am pregnant or breastfeeding?

- Yes, doctors recommend getting the vaccination if you are pregnant or breastfeeding to protect both mother and baby since both may be more at risk for getting really sick with COVID-19.

Do I need to keep wearing a mask after I receive the COVID-19 vaccine?

- Yes. Unfortunately, even people who have had the COVID-19 vaccine may be able to spread the virus to others even though the vaccine protects them from getting seriously sick. (We do not know how common this is yet.) Until most people have been vaccinated against COVID-19, everyone needs to continue wearing masks, practicing physical distancing, and washing their hands often.

If I already had COVID-19, do I need to get the COVID-19 vaccine?

- Yes, you should get the vaccine even if you already had COVID-19.
- It's safe to get the vaccine after you have had already had COVID-19.
- Right now, research shows it is very rare to get COVID-19 again for 3 months after you have had it, but you could get COVID-19 again after that. For this reason, you should still get the vaccine if you had COVID-19 more than 3 months ago.
- You should NOT get the vaccine if you are currently sick with COVID-19; wait until you are no longer sick with COVID-19 and you are no longer under quarantine.

Is the COVID-19 vaccine mandatory (required)?

- No, neither the state nor federal government says that you must get the vaccine. The VA and public health officials hope that by telling people how safe the vaccine is and how well it works, people will be willing to get the vaccine to protect themselves and others.

I got the COVID-19 vaccine because I want things to go back to normal. When will that happen?



- We don't know when enough people will be vaccinated so that things can get back to normal. But the more people that get the vaccine, the sooner things will begin to return to normal. Also, when you get the vaccine you protect other people around you by making it less likely for them to get COVID-19.

I have heard that some other Veterans and some people who work at the VA are not getting vaccinated. If they aren't getting it, why should I?

- There are many reasons why people are afraid to get the vaccine. These include not knowing about the safety of the vaccine or understanding how well the vaccine works; not understanding the risks of COVID-19 itself; mistrust of the government, science and the medical system; and more. We encourage you to learn all that you can about the COVID-19 vaccine. It is important that you decide for yourself about getting the vaccine no matter what other people are doing.

I still have more questions, what should I do?

- You, your family and friends can get more information about the COVID-19 vaccine at these trusted sites:
<https://covid19.ca.gov/vaccines/>
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html>
- You can attend a San Francisco VA "COVID-19 Vaccine: Veteran Question and Answer" session:
 - Mondays, 4:30pm-6pm; starting February 22, 2021
 - [Right click to Open Hyperlink and join online.](#)
 - Or copy and paste:
<https://veteransaffairs.webex.com/veteransaffairs/j.php?MTID=m469f17741808255ddfeec2d7b84de185>
 - Meeting password: 9pAf8pcQ3J@
 - To join by phone, call 1-404-397-1596.
 - Meeting number (access code): 199 472 9820

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: COVID-19 Vaccination
<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/info-by-product/clinical-considerations.html>;
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html>
2. State of California COVID-19 Vaccine Information Center <https://covid19.ca.gov/vaccines/>
UCSF COVID-19 Vaccine Information Hub <https://coronavirus.ucsf.edu/vaccines>