



Melbourne School of Population and Global Health
Nossal Institute for Global Health

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Fact Sheet: COVID-19 vaccinations

Questions and answers for people with disabilities

The fact sheet has been written to address some common questions and concerns that people with disabilities have about getting the COVID-19 vaccination.

IMPORTANT: The information here is general advice. If you have specific concerns or questions about your own health needs and how the COVID-19 vaccine might affect you, you should speak to your doctor or health care practitioner about these concerns before getting the vaccine.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 (also known as coronavirus) is an infectious disease caused by a new virus. While most people infected with COVID-19 will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness (i.e. affecting the lungs) and recover without special treatment, some people develop a more serious illness. These include older people, and those with underlying medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease and diabetes.

COVID-19 is primarily spread through droplets from the mouth or nose, especially when coughing and sneezing. However, some people can spread the virus even if they do not have symptoms. To prevent transmission, it is recommended people wash their hands frequently, avoid touching their face, cough or sneeze into a bent elbow or tissue, stay at least 1.5m from others, and wear a mask when distancing isn't possible. There may also be local advice where you live and work.

What are the risks of getting COVID-19 for people with disabilities?

People with disabilities may be at greater risk for contracting COVID-19, and of developing more severe disease if they do become infected.

Some groups are more vulnerable than others due to their impairments and support needs, which can make it more difficult to practice disease control measures. These groups include (but are not limited to) people needing 24-hour support, and those requiring personal assistance and guides.

Further to this, many people with disabilities have underlying health conditions. They also experience a range of barriers to health services, including accessible information & communications, timely & appropriate health care, and appropriate & affordable personal protective equipment. Preventative measures such as wearing a mask and social distancing

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can also be a challenge for some people, such as those who rely on lip reading and sign-language interpretation for communication. These challenges can be further compounded and disrupted by COVID 19 response restrictions (including lockdowns) especially for those reliant on external services and support.

What are COVID-19 vaccines?

COVID-19 vaccines have been developed to reduce the chance of spreading the virus and becoming seriously ill from COVID-19. Vaccines are particularly important for those who are at greater risk of developing serious illness from COVID-19, including older people and those with underlying conditions. In some countries, including Timor-Leste and Fiji, people with disabilities have been prioritised for early phases of the vaccine roll-out.

There are a number of different vaccines that have been developed and are being used in different countries. Some vaccines requires two doses, with the second given 8-12 weeks after the first dose. The interval between first dose and second dose may be different for other vaccines. It is important that you receive both doses of the vaccine to get maximum protection.

How safe are the COVID-19 vaccines?

There are internationally agreed standards for the safety and effectiveness of vaccines that they must meet before being approved. COVID-19 vaccinations have undergone rigorous testing in clinical trials and been assessed for safety by independent groups of experts, including the Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety. This group conducts ongoing monitoring of vaccine safety and effectiveness.

COVID-19 vaccines are currently not recommended for people with a history of severe allergic reactions to any vaccines. They are also not yet recommended for persons younger than 18, as there is limited research on the vaccine for this group.

Do my vaccines contravene my religious beliefs?

The Vatican, World Council of Churches and various Muslim groups have released statements publicly accepting the COVID-19 vaccination as ethical acceptable and indeed commendable. Some have raised ethical concerns regarding the manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines using **HEK-293 cells** in their testing and these cells are descended, through several thousand generations, from cells originally taken from a fetus (baby) in 1973. No abortions are being conducted to produce cells for this vaccine. These cells don't remain in the final vaccine but are used to biologically 'grow' some of the protein ingredients of the vaccines. The Vatican and many theologians around the world - including most of those who are against abortion in all circumstances – approve of the vaccine's use.

Where can I get a COVID-19 vaccine?

COVID-19 vaccinations may be offered at your nearest health centre, health post, government institution, or at private clinics, determined by the Ministry or Department of Health in your country. Check with the Ministry or Department of Health (e.g. by the website) to find out a) when you are eligible for a vaccination, and b) where to go to be vaccinated.

There's a limited supply of vaccines globally. For this reason, some groups are being prioritised for vaccine roll-out, including front-line health workers and quarantine staff; as well as those at greater risk of serious illness from COVID-19.

Will I have to pay for the vaccine?

The COVID-19 vaccine is free to the public. This is because National governments and international development partners (such as DFAT and the WHO) are sharing the costs of the vaccine program.

What if I can't access a vaccination centre because of my disability?

All people with disabilities (18 and over) have the right to access vaccination information and facilities. This means that support systems and reasonable accommodation **MUST** be provided to ensure these.

Where facilities are inaccessible, relevant authorities, supported by Organizations for People with Disabilities (OPDs), **MUST** provide outreach service or identify accessible locations for vaccinations. Outreach vaccinations for people with disabilities could be conducted during community outreach exercises, for example by the Ministry of Health supported by an OPD. Support systems and reasonable accommodation **MUST** be provided at vaccination facilities by relevant authorities, in collaboration with OPDs, to support access for people with disabilities.

If you are not able to access a vaccination centre (e.g. due to distance, physical or information inaccessibility), it is recommended to reach out to an OPD for assistance. They may have advice and can also advocate on your behalf.

Information on vaccine registrations systems and processes should be provided in accessible formats. If you cannot access this information, reach out to an OPD for assistance. Unfortunately, misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines can spread easily, especially on social media. Information and advice based on the most current evidence will be available from the WHO and your national Ministry or Department of Health (links provided at the end of the resource).

Do I have to have a COVID-19 vaccination?

It is your choice whether or not to be vaccinated. All vaccinations and medical treatments require free and informed consent. To make an informed decision, you can access information about the COVID-19 vaccine from credible sources, including health workers, the World Health Organisation, and the Ministry or Department of Health in your country. Links are provided at the end of this resource.

I have a chronic health condition, are the COVID-19 vaccines safe for me?

Vaccines have been found to be safe and effective for people with various underlying health conditions including high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, pulmonary, liver or kidney disease, and chronic infections that are stable and controlled. People with these conditions

are most at risk of serious illness from COVID-19, so health experts recommend these groups be immunised.

Those with compromised immune systems, older people who are frail, and people with a history of allergic reactions to vaccines, and people with HIV should consult their doctor before vaccination.

If you have a health condition and are not sure if you should get the vaccine, you should speak to your doctor before going to get vaccinated. People with disabilities should be supported to access medical advice prior to vaccination if needed by the individual.

I regularly take other medications, is it ok to have the COVID-19 vaccine?

Generally there is no issue to have the vaccine if you are taking other medications. However, if you are not sure if you should get the vaccine, you should first speak to your doctor. People with disabilities should be supported to access medical advice prior to vaccination if needed by the individual.

Will I have side effects from getting the vaccine?

You might have some side effects, which is normal and indicates that your body is building protection against the infection. Typical side effects of most vaccines, even non-COVID vaccines, can include pain, swelling and tenderness at the injection site, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, fever and chills. These side effects may affect your ability to do daily activities, but are not serious and should only last one or two days. Some people take paracetamol or ibuprofen to minimise their side-effects. Some people have no side-effects.

Rare side effects include severe allergic reactions. You should seek medical advice if you are experiencing severe symptoms, such as difficulty breathing, or if your side-effects have not gone away after a few days. After receiving the vaccine you may be asked to stay at the health clinic or vaccine hub for a short time (e.g. 30 mins) so that the health workers can observe any sudden, serious side effects before you go home.

People with disabilities should be supported to access medical assistance post-vaccination if needed by the individual.

Where can I get more information about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccinations?

WHO <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/covid-19-vaccines/advice>

UNICEF https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/what-you-need-to-know-covid-vaccine?fbclid=IwAR1DPX9nXg4RrvAeNQP6yuWf_UqzJp4kjq3KBbo13Lf6ImKtSXc-HbtubCM

Additional links are included at the end of this document. You can also check your country's Ministry or Department of Health website or social media page. Many countries have

information about COVID-19 and the COVID-19 vaccine roll out that is specific to their country.

For example:

Fiji <http://www.health.gov.fj/covid-vaccine/vaccine-faqs/>
PNG <https://covid19.info.gov.pg/index.php/covid-19-awareness/>
Solomon Islands <https://www.facebook.com/officialmhmsi/>
Vanuatu <https://www.facebook.com/Health-Promotions-Vanuatu-1674266679566197>
Timor-Leste <https://www.facebook.com/WHOTL/> or call the hotline number 119.

For more information:

For information about COVID-19 (also known as coronavirus):

https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

For information about COVID-19 vaccines:

World Health Organization. Vaccines Explained: Available at:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/covid-19-vaccines/explainers>

WHO Video on vaccine safety for people with underlying conditions:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8Remuje4bs&list=PL9S6xGsoqIBXHSDMCp8CjOmhULeQnJ_7J&index=9

[https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-vaccine-access-and-allocation](https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-vaccine-access-and-allocation)

For information about disability and COVID-19:

World Health Organization (2020). Disability considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/WHO-2019-nCoV-Disability-2020-1>

United Nations (2020). Policy brief: A disability-inclusive response to COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/disability-inclusion>

World Health Organization (2021) Disability considerations for COVID-19 vaccination. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/340858/WHO-2019-nCoV-Vaccination-and-disability-Policy-brief-2021.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

For information about the Catholic Church's position on the COVID-19 vaccination:

The Vatican: Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html