



Australian Government



# COVID-19 vaccination decision guide for people receiving palliative care and/or end-of-life care

Version 2.8

**Updated:** 12 January 2024

## **What has changed:**

- Updated links added to access information about COVID-19 vaccines and who should be vaccinated

This decision guide aims to assist a person receiving palliative or end-of-life care, or their caregiver, to make an informed decision about getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

People who have life-limiting illnesses should consider COVID-19 vaccination.

To find out more about the available COVID-19 vaccines, visit the Department of Health website: [www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines](http://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines). To find out more about who should be vaccinated, refer to the [Australian Immunisation Handbook](#).

## What is palliative care and what is end-of-life care?

**Palliative care** is treatment, care and support for people who are living with a life-limiting illness.

A life-limiting illness is one that has no cure and which will therefore shorten a person's life. Such illnesses can include, but are not limited to:

- cancer
- motor neurone disease
- end-stage kidney disease
- dementia
- neurodegenerative diseases
- some heart diseases such as heart failure
- some lung diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

**End-of-life care** refers to the care and services given to people facing the end of their life, usually the last 12 months of life. End-of-life care is an important part of palliative care.

Both palliative and end-of-life care are for people of any age, including children, adolescents, adults and the elderly.

## What are the risks from COVID-19 in people receiving palliative or end-of-life care?

Many people who are receiving palliative or end-of-life care will have a high risk of becoming seriously unwell if they get COVID-19. This is because they are likely to fall into one or more of the following high-risk groups:

- older adults
- people with multiple medical conditions, or medical conditions that are not well controlled
- people with weakened immune systems (immunocompromise)
- people with cancer, particularly blood cancer or lung cancer, and those having chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

Having COVID-19 may also disrupt the person's care plans. For example, it may be hard for the person with COVID-19 to receive care or have visitors.

Information about which medical conditions increase one's risk of severe illness from COVID-19, is available in the [Australian Immunisation Handbook](#)

## Are COVID-19 vaccines effective in people receiving palliative or end-of-life care?

The clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines did not include people receiving palliative or end-of-life care, or people with unstable medical conditions or weakened immune systems. This is because clinical trials for new vaccines start with young healthy volunteers. In real world data from the USA and UK, COVID-19 vaccines have been found to be less effective in people who have weakened immune systems and people with unstable medical conditions.

However, results from the COVID-19 vaccine programs in the USA and UK have found that the Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Moderna vaccines are effective at preventing serious illness in people with weakened immune systems and people with unstable medical conditions.

The clinical trials of Pfizer, Moderna, Novavax, and AstraZeneca included older adults aged 65 years and over. All trials showed the vaccine to be very effective and safe in adults aged 18 years and older. The Moderna and Pfizer vaccines have also been shown to be safe and effective in people aged 6 months and older.

## **Are COVID-19 vaccines safe in people receiving palliative or end-of-life care?**

COVID-19 vaccines are safe in people with chronic medical conditions.

There have been billions of COVID-19 vaccine doses given to people around the world. This includes people in residential aged care facilities and people with medical illnesses who have been prioritised for vaccination in many countries. No specific safety concerns have arisen relating to vaccination of people who are medically frail or at the end of their life. As with any vaccine, mild side effects are common, and there is a very rare risk of more serious side effects. Your immunisation provider can discuss the side effects of specific COVID-19 vaccines with you.

## **Should I have a COVID-19 vaccine if I am receiving palliative and/or end-of-life care?**

If you or someone you care for has an unstable medical condition or is very frail, you can discuss the appropriateness and timing of vaccination with your healthcare provider.

If you are close to the end of your life, you may have many things to consider when deciding whether to have the COVID-19 vaccine. There will be different considerations for each person.

### **Possible benefits of vaccination**

Being vaccinated will protect you against serious illness from COVID-19. COVID-19 is a serious illness which can cause death.

### **Possible harms of vaccination**

You may experience some side effects after vaccination, such as fever, chills, headache, tiredness or muscle pain. These side effects may temporarily affect your ability to carry out daily activities.

These side effects could have a negative impact on your quality of life for a short period of time (usually less than 24 hours).

There is a very rare risk of serious side effects.

### **Other things to consider**

Your preferences regarding treatment, which you may already have considered in an advance care directive or similar care plan. The vaccine is an optional preventative treatment, and this may not be a priority for you at this time.

You can encourage your carers and loved ones to get vaccinated when they have the opportunity. This might also provide some indirect protection to you.

## **Children in palliative care**

Children in palliative care may have conditions that increase their risk of severe COVID-19, for example, immunocompromise due to cancer treatment. There are COVID-19 vaccines approved for use in children aged 6 months and older. The vaccines are effective at preventing serious illness, hospitalisation and death due to COVID-19 in children.

To find out more about the available COVID-19 vaccines, visit the Department of Health website: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/recommended-covid-19-vaccine-doses?language=en>.

To find out more about who should be vaccinated, refer to the [Australian Immunisation Handbook](#).