



COVID-19 vaccines common questions

This document contains common questions and answers about the COVID-19 vaccines.

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Vaccines-related questions

Q. Why should I get a COVID-19 vaccine?

A. COVID-19 can be a very serious illness, especially for our elders and those in our community who have existing medical conditions. Getting a vaccine is one of the best ways of protecting yourself and others in your community from getting really sick or even dying from COVID-19.

There is also more and more evidence that vaccines help reduce the spread of the virus.

Encourage your family, Elders and community to get vaccinated so that they are protected from serious illness from COVID-19.

The COVID-19 vaccines are free and voluntary.

Q. What are the expected (normal) side effects? What should I do and where should I go if my side effects are more severe than expected?

A. As part of the Therapeutic Goods Administration's (TGA) approval process, all vaccines are tested and studied for serious side effects.

For the vaccine to have approval in Australia, the benefit must be greater than the risk. All vaccines can have some side effects. These usually don't last long and are mild.

Common side effects are:

- sore arm
- headache
- feeling tired
- body aches
- fever.

These side effects are normal after getting a vaccine, and usually don't last for more than a few days.

Q. What are the rare side effects of the COVID-19 vaccines?

As with other medicines, some people could experience severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) rare side effect:

There is a very rare blood-clotting condition after receiving the AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine, called thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS).

- The symptoms of this usually start between 4 and 28 days after vaccination.
- Some of these symptoms include shortness of breath, chest pain, headache or abdominal (belly) pain that won't go away and leg swelling. You may also see tiny blood spots under the skin, away from where the needle went in.
- People who get this can get very sick and may need to go to hospital.
- These blood clots are severe and can lead to disability or even death.
- These blood clots can be treated effectively.

If you have a side effect that

- worries you
- lasts for more than a few days
- is listed as a rare side effect of COVID-19 vaccines

you should seek medical attention straightaway.

Learn more about [vaccine side effects on the Department of Health website](#).

Q. Which vaccine can I get?

A. The AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine is preferred for adults aged 60 years and over. The Pfizer (Comirnaty) vaccine has been approved for people aged 12 years and older. Pfizer (Comirnaty) is the preferred vaccine for adults under 60 years who have not already received their first dose of AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine.

This is due to the increase in risk for adults aged under 60 years in developing thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) (explained above), and the larger risk of adults aged 60 years and over in getting really sick from COVID-19.

If you live in an outbreak area where the risk of getting COVID-19 is very high, you should strongly consider getting vaccinated with any COVID-19 vaccine you can. This has been recommended by ATAGI (Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation), Australia's immunisation experts.

Those who live in rural or remote communities may be offered the Pfizer (Comirnaty) vaccine.

All Australians are encouraged to have the vaccine offered to them when they are eligible.

Q. What if I am under 60 years old and have already had my first dose of the AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine?

A. It is important you get the same type of COVID-19 vaccine for both doses. This is because the evidence from clinical trials shows this is effective and is what is approved for use by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

People who have had the first dose of the AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine without any serious side effects can safely be given the second dose, including adults under 60 years.

Overseas data suggest the risk of thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) is much lower after the second dose than the first.

Q. Can I choose not to be vaccinated?

A. Yes, you do not have to have the vaccine. The COVID-19 vaccination is voluntary, but strongly recommended. It will help you not to get really sick from COVID-19. Encourage your family, Elders and community to get vaccinated so that they are protected as well.

If you choose not to get a COVID-19 vaccine, this will not affect eligibility for government assistance (Family Tax Benefit A) or childcare fee assistance.

If you work in aged care, must be vaccinated. This is because we need to protect older people who can get really sick if they catch COVID-19.

Q. Do I still need the vaccine if I have already had COVID-19?

A. People who have had COVID-19 and recovered should still be vaccinated. The protection someone gets after having COVID-19 is different from person to person.

Because this virus is new, experts don't yet know how long any natural immunity might last.

Even if you have already had COVID-19, you should still get the COVID-19 vaccine when you can. People may wait for up to 6 months between having COVID-19 and getting a vaccine if they wish. Make an appointment to speak to your doctor about when you should be vaccinated.

Q. How long will my protection last after I have both doses of the vaccine?

A. It is not yet known how long the protection of the COVID-19 vaccine will last. We will know more through ongoing research. Clinical trials are in progress to find out if we will need booster doses on an annual or longer basis.



Q. Can I still get COVID-19 after receiving both doses of the vaccine?

A. The COVID-19 vaccines cannot fully protect you against COVID-19, just as the annual flu vaccination cannot fully protect you against the flu.

Evidence shows that COVID-19 vaccines are very effective at helping to prevent you from getting very sick, going to hospital, or dying from COVID-19.

Q. Can the vaccine give you COVID-19 virus?

A. Neither of the approved vaccines in Australia contains the live virus. This means they cannot give you COVID-19.

Some of the side effects from COVID-19 vaccines, such as fever and feeling tired can feel like the symptoms of COVID-19. These symptoms are normal and are a sign that the body is building protection against the COVID-19 virus.

For advice about side effects from different doses of vaccines, ask your doctor or healthcare worker.

Q. Who can I contact if I have questions about the COVID-19 vaccines?

A. You can learn more at the Department of Health's [COVID-19 vaccine information hub](#). You can also subscribe to the [COVID-19 Vaccines Update](#).

If you would like to talk to someone, please call the National Coronavirus Helpline that operates 24/7 on 1800 020 080, or talk to your local healthcare worker.

Vaccine priority groups

Q. How was it decided who the priority groups for vaccines are? Why are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples a priority group for the COVID-19 vaccine?


A. The Australian Government has been advised by medical experts about the priority groups. Based on their advice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been identified as a priority group.

This is because there is a higher risk of getting and becoming very sick from COVID-19 due to a number of factors. This may include a higher rate of chronic health conditions and in some cases crowded living conditions, which increase the risk of spreading the infection.

Access

Q. Will everyone have access to the vaccine if they would like to receive it – even if they live in remote areas?

A. Yes, the approved vaccines will be accessible to everyone in Australia.



There will be many sites across Australia where the vaccine will be available. A lot of them will be in rural and remote locations. This includes sites such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Services, Commonwealth vaccine clinics, general practices (GP) or state/territory health services/clinics.

If there are several locations close to you, you may be able to choose. For example, this can be an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Service or a GP clinic.

Q. I live remotely and move between places, what should I do?

A. You don't have to get your second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the same location where you got your first one.

If you live remotely and move between places, get in touch with your current local clinic to talk about your options. Your healthcare worker can help you plan. They will let you know when you should receive your second dose.

The Pfizer (Comirnaty) vaccine is most effective when you get your second dose 3 weeks after your first dose, but it can be given anytime between 3 to 6 weeks. The AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine is most effective when you get your second dose 12 weeks after your first dose, but it can be given anytime between 4 to 12 weeks. You can find a local clinic wherever you are in Australia by using the [COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic Finder](#). The Clinic Finder lets people:

- check when they can book their vaccine appointment,
- search for vaccination clinics by location,
- and schedule appointments either online or over the phone.

COVID-19 vaccines will be more available over the coming months and there will be more appointments available.

You can also call the National Coronavirus and COVID-19 Vaccine Helpline on 1800 020 080 to speak to someone to help you find a vaccine clinic near you. They will give you the contact information to make a booking.

Q. I've heard that one of the vaccines has to be kept at a very cold temperature to work. How are you planning to safely transport it to remote communities?

A. The Australian Government Department of Health is working with transport companies and the Royal Flying Doctor Service to ensure the safe delivery of the vaccines as a priority. This includes using refrigerated vehicles and specialised equipment to keep the vaccine at the right temperature.

Vaccine safety and efficacy

Q. Who approves the COVID-19 vaccines and what is the process?

A. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) assesses all COVID-19 vaccines for quality, safety and efficacy. This is the same process that all vaccines go through in Australia.

Medical and scientific experts within the TGA continuously assess the vaccine. This is done by using data from clinical trials and countries who are already using the vaccine. They will also use new data collected during the vaccination program in Australia.

You can find out more about the TGA's approval process on [the TGA website](#).

Q. Should pregnant women get vaccinated?

A. COVID-19 during pregnancy increases the risk of complications for pregnant women and their unborn babies.

All pregnant women are eligible to be vaccinated.

Pfizer (Comirnaty) is the preferred COVID-19 vaccine to get if you are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning pregnancy. Research from around the world shows that the Pfizer (Comirnaty) vaccine is safe for pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy, and for breastfeeding women. Pregnant women are now eligible to get the Pfizer (Comirnaty) COVID-19 vaccine.

If you catch COVID-19, you and your unborn baby could be in danger. There is:

- a higher risk of needing to go to hospital
- a slightly higher chance of the baby being born early and needing to go to a hospital
- a slightly higher risk of stillbirth (baby being born not alive).

Getting a COVID-19 vaccine at any time during pregnancy is the best way to lower these risks. For the best protection, pregnant women should receive 2 doses of the Pfizer (Comirnaty) vaccine, 3 to 6 weeks apart.

For more information about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines for pregnant women, [visit the website](#). If you have any further questions, talk to your local healthcare worker.

Q. Should children get vaccinated?

A. The Pfizer (Comirnaty) COVID-19 vaccine has been approved for children aged 12 to 15 years in Australia. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children in remote areas, are eligible to receive this COVID-19 vaccine.

Studies from around the world are showing the Pfizer (Comirnaty) vaccine is very good at keeping children aged 12 to 15 years from getting sick from COVID-19. To find out what's right for you and your family, have a yarn with your local healthcare worker.



Q. How can you make a vaccine so quickly?

A. Safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines have been able to be developed faster than any other vaccine for several reasons:

- a level of funding not seen before
- the availability of new technology and
- researchers and developers around the world working together.

Some steps of the clinical trials and approval processes have been done at the same time instead of one after the other. As soon as the initial data was available the trials were able to progress. This has given us access to the vaccine as quickly as possible.

The vaccines were developed and approved very quickly around the world but still followed the same process as other vaccine approvals. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) still carefully studied all of the available results and data from clinical trials. After assessing this data to make sure that the vaccines were safe and met Australian standards, the TGA gave their approval.

Q. How effective is the vaccine?

A. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) assesses potential COVID-19 vaccines to ensure approved vaccines are safe and effective.

Current evidence is showing that the COVID-19 vaccines are very effective at helping to prevent you from getting very sick, going to hospital, or dying from COVID-19.

The data on how effective the vaccines will be at preventing the spread of COVID-19, and how long immunity will last, will be received in the coming months.

Q. Will the COVID-19 vaccine work if the virus mutates?

A. Most viruses change (mutate) slightly over time. The virus that causes COVID-19 is no different and there are new variants of the virus that have been detected around the world.

Current evidence from clinical trials indicates that Australia's approved COVID-19 vaccines are likely to provide protection to a variety of mutations and minor changes. However, there may be cases in the future where the current vaccines are not as effective against some variants. This information is still emerging and is being closely monitored.

In the same way that the influenza vaccine changes each year, the technology used to create the COVID-19 vaccines may allow the vaccines to be adapted to changes in variants.



Q. What happens if I don't take my second dose or if I am late for it?

A. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has approved two vaccines in Australia: the Pfizer (Comirnaty) vaccine and the AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine. Both vaccines require two doses to be most effective.

The Pfizer (Comirnaty) vaccine is most effective when you get your second dose 3 weeks after your first dose, but it can be given anytime between 3 to 6 weeks. The AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine is most effective when you get your second dose 12 weeks after your first dose, but it can be given anytime between 4 to 12 weeks. It is important that every person receives the full two doses of the same vaccine. If you don't get the second dose you will have lower immunity and it may not last as long. The person doing your vaccination will let you know what type of vaccine you received, and when you should book your second appointment.

If you don't get your second dose at the recommended time, talk to your local healthcare worker to make a new time to get the vaccine.

If you catch COVID-19 before you have your second dose, you may need to wait before you can have your second dose. Talk to your local healthcare worker if you get COVID-19 before your second dose.

About COVID-19

Q. What is COVID-19?

A. COVID-19 is an illness caused by a coronavirus. Since it is new, there is little existing immunity in our community. Without good hygiene, physical distancing and other protective measures, COVID-19 could spread widely and quickly. COVID-19 vaccines are helping to increase immunity in our community.

Q. Who can get COVID-19?

A. Anyone can get COVID-19. The elderly and people with chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes are most at risk of serious COVID-19 infections.

Thanks to the communities' hard work, numbers have been very low for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with no deaths. However, there have still been 211 cases so far (as at 12 August 2021).

Q. How serious is COVID-19?

A. Thousands of people around the world are dying of COVID-19 every day. Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 4.4 million people have died and there have been more than 210 million cases of COVID-19 around the world. In Australia, 984 people have died as a result of COVID-19 (as at 25 August 2021).

We have also seen how quickly and widely COVID-19 can spread, which is why vaccination is important. It is important that everyone who can get a vaccine does get one when it is offered to them, to help keep themselves, others and the community safe.

