COVID-19 vaccines common questions

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

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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. COVID-19 can 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.

There have been **more than 40,000 COVID-19 cases in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities so far** (as at 31 January 2022).

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 5.6 million people have died** and there have been more than 380 million cases of COVID-19 around the world.

In Australia, there have been more than one million cases of COVID-19, and sadly, 3,904 people have died as a result of the virus (as at 02 February 2022).

We have also seen how quickly and widely COVID-19 can spread, which is why vaccination is important. It is important that everyone aged 5 years and older, who can get a vaccine does get one to help keep themselves, others, and the community safe.

If you have symptoms of COVID-19, use the [Symptom Checker](#) to see if you need to seek medical help or get tested. If you are worried about your symptoms, you can also call the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080, 24 hours a day.

Q. What is 'long COVID' and why is it bad?

Most people who get COVID-19 will have symptoms for a short time and then get well within a few weeks. The time it takes to get well from COVID-19 is different for each person. This depends on how sick you were with COVID-19, and if you have any other existing health conditions.

There are some people who experience long-term health problems after having COVID-19. Sometimes COVID-19 causes a person to feel unwell for many months after they first become sick. This is called 'long COVID'. Long COVID can last for many weeks or months, even after a person no longer has the virus.

Even people who had a mild COVID-19 infection and did not need to go to hospital can still experience long COVID. Common long COVID symptoms include extreme tiredness, shortness of breath, problems with memory and concentration and difficulty sleeping. If you have persisting symptoms following infection with COVID-19, you should see your doctor.

Many long-term side effects from COVID-19 are still not known. This is why it is important that you do everything you can to protect yourself against being infected with the COVID-19 virus. Vaccination is the best way to reduce the risks of COVID-19.

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 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 of the COVID-19 vaccine? 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).

Vaxzevria (AstraZeneca) rare side effect:

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

- The symptoms of this usually start between 4 and 42 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.

Comirnaty (Pfizer) and Spikevax (Moderna) rare side effect:

There is a very rare risk of developing conditions called myocarditis and pericarditis after receiving the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

- Myocarditis is when the heart muscle becomes inflamed, and pericarditis is when the thin sac that surrounds the heart becomes inflamed.
- Symptoms of these conditions usually start within 1 to 5 days after vaccination.
- Some of these symptoms include chest pain, an irregular heartbeat, fainting, or shortness of breath.
- Most myocarditis and pericarditis cases linked to Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccinations have been mild and patients have recovered quickly.
- People who feel these symptoms should seek medical attention straightaway.

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.

health.gov.au/covid19-vaccines

04 February 2022

Q. Which vaccine can I get?

A.

Criteria	Pfizer	Moderna	Novavax	AstraZeneca
Approved age group	5 years and over	12 years and over	18 years and over	18 years and over
First and second dose (initial course)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Third dose for immunocompromised people	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not preferred
Booster dose	Yes, 16 years and over	Yes, 18 years and over	Not preferred	Not preferred

If you've had one dose of a vaccine with no serious side effects, you need to receive a second dose of the same vaccine.

It is recommended that everyone 16 years of age and over get a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. You can get your booster dose 3 months after your initial vaccine course (2 doses for most people, or 3 doses for those who have serious issues with their immunity).

Q. Can I choose not to be vaccinated?

A. The COVID-19 vaccine is strongly recommended.

Some states and territories have issued public health orders that require people working in certain workplaces and some community activities to get vaccinated. There may also be limitations on attending public places such as restaurants and non-essential shopping. Please check your local guidelines.

Talk to your doctor or health worker if you have questions about the benefits of being vaccinated.

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

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. 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. The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) are Australia's immunisation experts. They are continuing to study ongoing research and real-world data about how long COVID-19 vaccines offer the most protection against the virus in Australia and overseas.

Over time, the protection from vaccines lessens. This is why ATAGI recommends that everyone who is 16 years and older get a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine 3 months or longer after their first two doses. This is so everyone has the most protection possible against COVID-19 for the longest period of time.

Q. Can I still get COVID-19 after receiving two 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. What happens if I don't take my second dose or if I am late for it?

A. All 4 COVID-19 vaccines available in Australia require 2 doses for vaccination.

Vaccine:	Approved age:	You should receive your second dose after:
Pfizer vaccine	12 years and over	3 to 6 weeks
Pfizer vaccine (child dose)	5 to 11 years	8 weeks
Moderna vaccine	12 years and over	4 to 6 weeks
AstraZeneca vaccine	18 years and over	4 to 12 weeks
Novavax vaccine	18 years and over	3 weeks

It is important that you receive 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. It is also important that, once you finish your initial

vaccine course, you have your booster dose when you are eligible. This will help to maintain your protection against COVID-19.

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.

Q. What's the difference between a third dose and a booster dose?

A. As more information about how COVID-19 vaccines are working around the world, Australia's immunisation experts continue to make updates to their recommendations about what's best for people in Australia.

A **third dose** of the COVID-19 vaccine is recommended for people aged 5 years and over who are severely immunocompromised. People with serious issues with their immunity are at a much greater risk of getting very sick from COVID-19 and need a third dose to be fully protected against the virus. If you have serious issues with your immunity, you should get your third dose from 2 to 6 months after getting your second dose. If you're not sure if you should get a third dose, have a yarn with your healthcare worker.

Booster doses are recommended for everyone 16 years and over who had their initial COVID-19 vaccination course. This is 2 doses for most people and 3 doses for those who have serious issues with their immunity. Over time, the protection from vaccines is reduced. This is why it's important that you get a booster dose when you're able to. A booster dose will give you more protection against COVID-19 for a longer period of time.

You can book third doses and booster doses on the '<u>Vaccine Clinic Finder'</u>, or have a yarn with your healthcare worker about a location near you.

Q. When should I get my COVID-19 vaccine booster dose?

A booster dose will help maintain your protection against COVID-19. You can get your booster dose if you are 16 years of age or older and have completed your COVID-19 vaccination course (2 doses for most people, or 3 doses for those who are severely immunocompromised) at least 3 months ago.

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are approved by the TGA and ATAGI for the COVID-19 booster dose. You can have the Pfizer vaccine as a booster dose if you are 16 years and over. You can have either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine as a booster if you are 18 years and over. It doesn't matter which vaccine brand you had for your first two doses.

You can also get the AstraZeneca vaccine as a booster if you can't have the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine for medical reasons, or you have had two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine previously.

Booster doses are not currently recommended for children aged under 16 years.

Q. What happens if I don't get a booster dose?

A. If you don't get a booster dose, you will have less protection against COVID-19 over time. This may mean you have a higher risk of getting sick and/or spreading the virus to your friends, family and community.

The COVID-19 booster dose is voluntary, however it is recommended that everyone get a free booster dose when they're able to.

Q. Should children get vaccinated?

A. Children aged 5 to 11 years are now able to get the Pfizer vaccine. The dose that children aged 5 to 11 years will get is one third the size of the dose that everyone aged 12 years and over will get.

Children aged 12 to 15 years are able to get the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines now. More than 75 per cent of all children in Australia aged 12 to 15 years have had two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine (as at 03 February 2022). Almost 1 million children aged 5 to 11 years in Australia have received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine (as at 03 February 2022)

Studies and real-world evidence show that COVID-19 vaccines are very good at keeping children aged 5 years and over 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. Can the vaccine give you COVID-19 virus?

A. None 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.

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 are accessible to everyone in Australia aged 5 years and over.

There are many sites across Australia where the vaccine are available. A lot of them are 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), state/territory health services/clinics and community pharmacies.

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

A. You don't have to get your second dose or your booster 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 and booster dose.

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.

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.

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 get the Pfizer, Moderna and Novavax COVID-19 vaccines.

The Pfizer, Moderna and Novavax vaccines are the preferred COVID-19 vaccines to get if you are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning pregnancy. Research from around the world shows that the COVID-19 vaccine is safe for pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy, and for breastfeeding women.

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.

Pregnant women should get a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose 3 months after they finish their COVID-19 vaccination course (2 doses for most people, or 3 doses for those who are severely immunocompromised). This will give pregnant women the most protection against COVID-19 for a longer period of time.

For more information about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines for pregnant women, visit the Department of Health website. If you have any further questions, or if you are eligible for a booster dose, talk to 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.
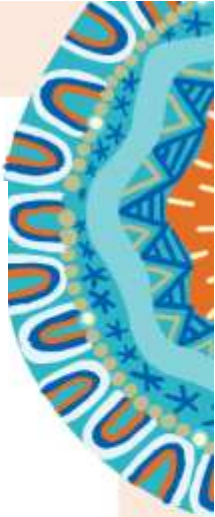
Current evidence is showing that the COVID-19 vaccines are very effective at helping to prevent you from getting very sick, going to hospital, or dying from COVID-19.

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. 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 hours and day, 7 days a week on 1800 020 080, or talk to your local healthcare worker.