COVID-19 vaccines common questions

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

- Vaccines-related questions
- Vaccine safety and efficacy
- Access to vaccines

Vaccines-related questions

Why should I get a COVID-19 vaccine?

COVID-19 can be a very serious illness, especially for our elders and those who have existing medical conditions, and for people who have not been vaccinated. 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. COVID-19 vaccines are free and voluntary. Encourage your family, Elders and community to get vaccinated so that they are protected from serious illness from COVID-19.

Who can get a COVID-19 vaccine?

Everyone aged 5 years or older in Australia can get a COVID-19 vaccine for free.

Some children aged 6 months to under 5 years, who are severely immunocompromised, have disability, or have complex and/ or multiple health conditions, are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine.

You can find a clinic and book a COVID-19 vaccine using the vaccine clinic finder at https://covid-vaccine.healthdirect.gov.au/

To maintain protection against getting very sick from COVID-19, keep up to date with your COVID-19 vaccinations, as recommended for your age and health needs.

For more information about how many COVID-19 vaccine doses you need, and when you should get them, visit www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-19-vaccination-when-to-get-your-covid-19-vaccination-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people

What COVID-19 doses do I need to stay up to date?

Like many vaccines, immunity from COVID-19 vaccine reduces over time. New variants of COVID-19 are also very good at evading people's immunity against prior infection and vaccination. Additional doses of a COVID-19 vaccine will help make sure your protection against getting very sick from COVID-19 is maintained. They will also help prevent severe illness from COVID-19.

A **third dose** is recommended for everyone 16 years and over 3 months after their last dose. Third doses are also recommended for some people aged 12 to 15 years if they have certain health conditions.

A **fourth dose** of the vaccine is recommended for everyone aged 50 years and older, and people aged 16 years and older at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. You can get your fourth dose 3 months after your third dose. People aged 30 to 49 years old can also receive a fourth dose if they choose.

Some people may require an **additional dose** if they are severely immunocompromised. This is because people who are severely immunocompromised are at a much greater risk of getting very sick from COVID-19. Speak with your healthcare worker to find out what is right for you.

For more information about who is eligible for third and fourth doses, visit www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-19-vaccination-when-to-get-your-covid-19-vaccination-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people

Have a yarn with your healthcare worker if you are not sure what doses you should receive to stay up to date with your COVID-19 vaccinations.

Do I still need a vaccine if I have already had COVID-19?

Yes. People who have had COVID-19 and have recovered should still get vaccinated.

It is safe for people who have had COVID-19 to get vaccinated. If you have tested positive for COVID-19, it is recommended that you wait 3 months before receiving your next dose. Waiting 3 months between infection from COVID-19 and vaccination is likely to maintain your protection against getting very sick from COVID-19.

How long will my protection last?

Over time, the protection from vaccines reduces. Real-world evidence shows that after two doses, COVID-19 vaccines continue to provide good protection against severe disease for at least 6 months. The effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines against severe disease remains above 70 per cent in people aged 65 years or older and above 80 percent in people aged 18 to 64 years.

A third dose of COVID-19 vaccine increases this protection against severe disease to over 95 per cent in the month following the third dose. This protection only reduces slightly to over 85 per cent effectiveness against severe disease 3 months after the third dose.

This is why Australia's immunisation experts, the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) recommends that everyone who is 16 years and older get a third dose of a COVID-19 vaccine 3 months after their last dose, and why some people are

recommended to receive a fourth dose. Additional doses of a COVID-19 vaccine will help make sure your protection against getting very sick from COVID-19 is maintained.

Can I still get COVID-19 after being vaccinated?

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

People who have been vaccinated can still catch COVID-19, but the 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.

Should children get vaccinated?

Australia's immunisation experts recommend that all children aged 5 years and over are vaccinated against COVID-19. All children aged 5 and over can get a COVID-19 vaccine.

Everyone is at risk of getting COVID-19, including children and young people. Although most children and young people who get COVID-19 have a mild illness, some can still get very sick. Ensuring children are up to date with their COVID-19 vaccinations reduces this risk.

Some children aged 6 months to under 5 years, who are severely immunocompromised, have disability, or have complex and/ or multiple health conditions, are eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine. These children have an increased risk of getting very sick from COVID-19. Eligible children in this age group will be able to receive the Spikevax (Moderna) vaccine.

Children aged 5 years and older may receive either the Moderna or Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. It is preferred that children aged 5 years and over have the same brand of vaccines for both doses.

Studies and real-world evidence show that COVID-19 vaccines are very good at keeping children 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.

Should pregnant women get vaccinated?

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 and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines.

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are the preferred COVID-19 vaccines to get if you are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning pregnancy. If you cannot have these vaccines, you can have the Novavax or AstraZeneca vaccine. Women can receive the vaccine at any stage of pregnancy.

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

health.gov.au/covid19-vaccines

- 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.

Research from around the world shows that the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are safe for pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy, and for breastfeeding women.

There are no known safety concerns associated with Nuvaxovid (Novavax) or Vaxzevria (AstraZeneca) that are specific to pregnancy, breastfeeding or planning pregnancy. However, these vaccines are not preferred because there is less data about their safety in pregnant or breastfeeding women.

People who are 12 years and older should get a third COVID-19 vaccine dose 3 months after their last dose. Pregnant women 16 years and over with other health conditions may be eligible for a fourth dose. If you are not sure if you should have a third dose or fourth dose, have a yarn with your healthcare worker.

For more information about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines for pregnant women, [visit the Department of Health website](#).

Can I use oral antiviral medication instead of getting vaccinated?

There are currently two COVID-19 oral antiviral treatments available in Australia. These are given to some people after they test positive for COVID-19 and can be taken at home. Oral antiviral treatments are not meant to be used as an alternative to getting vaccinated.

Oral antiviral treatments are for people who are at a high risk of getting very sick from COVID-19. Not everyone who tests positive will need COVID-19 oral treatment. Your doctor will need to determine whether this treatment is suitable for you. The treatments may have side effects.

These oral treatments are available to those who are eligible regardless of their vaccination status. For information about eligibility for COVID-19 oral antiviral treatments, visit www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-19-vaccination-fact-sheet-oral-treatments-for-covid-19-and-eligibility-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people

The best way for everyone to protect themselves from getting very sick from COVID-19 is to get vaccinated.

Can a COVID-19 vaccine help protect me from long COVID?

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, and if you have any other existing health conditions.

There are some people who experience long-term health problems after having COVID-19. Sometimes it 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 people who had a mild infection and did not need to go to hospital can still experience long COVID. Common 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 unknown. This is why it is important that you do everything you can to protect yourself against being infected. Vaccination is the best way to do this but COVIDSafe behaviours can help. Studies have shown that vaccination reduces your risk of getting long COVID symptoms.

Vaccine safety and efficacy

What are the normal side effects of a COVID-19 vaccine? What should I do and where should I go if my side effects are more severe than expected?

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.

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

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

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.

Pfizer and Moderna rare side effects:

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.

You 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.

Can the vaccine give you COVID-19?

No, none of the approved vaccines in Australia contain live virus. This means they cannot give you COVID-19.

Some of the side effects from the vaccine, 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.

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

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.

How can you make a vaccine so quickly?

Safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines were 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 were 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 gave 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) 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 approved the use of these vaccines.

How effective are the vaccines?

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

Current evidence shows 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.

Data from studies around the world have shown that COVID-19 vaccines can reduce transmission of the virus from vaccinated people with breakthrough COVID-19 infections to their household contacts.

Will COVID-19 vaccines work if the virus changes?

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.

Scientific evidence shows COVID-19 vaccines can still help prevent severe disease from new mutations of COVID-19. The TGA continues to closely review this as part of their usual approval and monitoring processes.

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.

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

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 on 1800 020 080, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, or talk to your local healthcare worker.

Access

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

You don't have to receive your next COVID-19 vaccine at the same place you received your last one.

If you live remotely and move regularly between places, contact your local clinic to talk about your options. Your healthcare worker can help you plan. They will advise when you should receive your next dose.

How can I book an appointment?

You can find a local COVID-19 vaccination 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.

How do I book my vaccine through the Easy Vaccine Access (EVA) service?

You can also easily book a COVID-19 vaccine appointment by using the Easy Vaccine Access (EVA) service. EVA is a call back service that is available every day from 7am to 10pm (AEST). Send a text message with 'Hey EVA' to 0481 611 382, and include:

- your name
- preferred date and time for your call back
- best number for a call back.

A trained operator from the National Coronavirus Helpline will call you back at the scheduled time to help you book your COVID-19 vaccination.