

COVID-19 Vaccine Planning

Frequently Asked Questions for Veterans

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General

1. Why do I need a COVID-19 vaccine?

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has caused severe illness and death around the world. This is, in part, because the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily from person to person.

We have some treatments to help reduce the effects of COVID-19 but a vaccine that helps prevent people from becoming infected is the best way to slow or stop the spread of the virus.

2. How do vaccines for viruses like the coronavirus protect me from getting sick?

Vaccines help train your body's natural immune system to recognize and fight a specific disease by stimulating a response to the virus that causes that disease.

When a virus is introduced to your body for the first time, your immune system mounts a defense. This includes making antibodies that help kill or neutralize the virus. If you're exposed to the same virus again, these antibodies also help your immune system recognize and fight the virus quickly.

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3. How will getting a vaccine benefit my family and community?

Vaccines protect you and the people around you. Protecting whole communities from diseases like COVID-19 is an important reason for everyone to get vaccines. We call this “community immunity.”

When enough people are vaccinated and develop immunity to a certain virus, that virus can't spread as easily from person to person. This means that everyone in the community is less likely to get infected. Even if some people do still get infected, there's less chance of an outbreak that causes many people in the community to get sick at the same time. This helps prevent issues like too many people needing care at once and not having enough hospital beds or health care providers.

4. Can I get the vaccine even if I've already had COVID-19?

At this time, we don't know. This will depend on the results of the COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are reviewing results for some of these trials now.

Many COVID-19 vaccine trials have enrolled participants even if they had COVID-19 in the past. The FDA and CDC will closely review the trial results to determine if people who've had COVID-19 should still get the vaccine.

5. Can I still get COVID-19 after I receive the vaccine?

An effective vaccine will lower your risk of getting infected with the virus that causes COVID-19. If you do get infected, the vaccine may also lower your risk of severe illness. But no vaccine can prevent all infections. That's why one goal of a COVID-19 vaccine is to make it harder for the virus to spread to others.

We'll have more information about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines after clinical trials are complete.

6. If I get the COVID-19 vaccine, can I stop wearing a mask in VA facilities?

No. Even if you receive a COVID-19 vaccine, you'll still need to wear a mask that covers your mouth and nose when you're in a VA facility. You'll also need to follow other VA safety rules like practicing physical distancing. This helps protect you, other Veterans, and our staff.

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COVID-19 Planning Process

7. When will VA have a final COVID-19 vaccination plan?

We submitted a draft plan to the CDC in October 2020 but the plan will not be finalized until these 2 events take place:

- The FDA authorizes or approves one or more COVID-19 vaccines, **and**
- The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) issues recommendations for how to give vaccines to specific groups of people.

Vaccine Approval and Authorization Process

8. Is there a cure or any FDA-approved treatments for COVID-19?

There is no cure for COVID-19 at this time. There are treatments for COVID-19, but the risk of severe illness and death are still high in certain groups of people. The FDA recently approved remdesivir as the first drug to treat COVID-19. Clinical studies have shown that remdesivir may reduce the risk of death and shorten the length of illness in some people with COVID-19.

9. What efforts are being taken to produce a COVID-19 vaccine?

Federal, private, and academic partners are working to provide a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine as quickly as possible. We expect the FDA to authorize or approve one or more COVID-19 vaccines for public use within the next few months.

This partnership is called [Operation Warp Speed](#). The partnership's goal is to deliver hundreds of millions of doses of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines to people across the country. To learn more about Operation Warp Speed, [read the Department of Health and Human Services fact sheet](#).

10. What is the FDA's role in approving a safe and effective vaccine for COVID-19?

The FDA is the government agency that regulates all vaccines used in the U.S. It ensures organizations that develop vaccines follow strict scientific and regulatory processes. The FDA also reviews all of the laboratory and clinical trial data for each vaccine to make sure the vaccine is safe and effective before it can be used by the American public. This review process usually takes several years.

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During a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, the FDA can issue an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). An EUA speeds up the FDA's review process to get critical medical products such as vaccines to people as quickly as possible. The process still includes all the same important steps, but in a shorter period of time. After the FDA authorizes the product, they continue to monitor the product's safety and effectiveness. This includes tracking any adverse reactions or side effects that people may report when using the product.

To learn more about how the FDA and other government partners are speeding up the process to get a COVID-19 vaccine, go to the [Operation Warp Speed Accelerated COVID-19 Vaccine Process infographic](#).

To learn more about the EUA process in general, play this [FDA video](#).

Who Will Get the Vaccine

11. How will VA decide who gets the vaccine while supplies are limited?

We're working with the CDC and other federal partners to develop a phased plan that will help us do the most good for the most people. Under this phased plan, we'll first offer vaccines to high-risk Veterans and staff based on CDC guidelines. These guidelines include the following criteria:

- Risk of becoming infected with the virus
- Risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19
- Risk of spreading the virus to others
- Risk of harm to society if essential workers are unable to work

12. Why is VA going to offer the COVID-19 vaccine to VA health care staff first?

Based on these criteria, we'll first offer the vaccine to our health care staff who are at highest risk from COVID-19. Vaccinating essential health care staff helps us meet these goals:

- Reducing the spread of the virus to Veterans who may be at high risk for severe illness if infected.
- Reducing the spread of the virus to other employees.
- Keeping our staff healthy so they can continue to care for Veterans.

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13. What criteria will VA use to decide which Veterans get the COVID-19 vaccine first?

While we have a limited supply of COVID-19 vaccines, we'll offer vaccines to Veterans based on their risk. In addition to the risk of getting infection, risk of passing infection to others, and the risk to society if someone is unable to work, we'll consider factors that may influence the risk of severe disease, including:

- **Age.** The risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19 increases with age.
- **Race and ethnicity.** Data shows that some groups of people have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. These include Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities.
- **Existing health problems.** People with certain health problems (like cancer, diabetes, or heart disease) have a higher risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19.
- **Other factors** that raise risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19, such as living in a nursing home or other group living facility.

To learn more about people at increased risk, [go to the CDC website.](#)

14. Will I be able to get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as one is available?

When the FDA first approves or authorizes a vaccine, we'll have a limited amount to start. During this time, we'll offer the vaccine to Veterans and VA health care staff with the highest risk of getting or spreading the coronavirus, or of becoming severely ill from COVID-19. Vaccinating our high-risk VA health care staff helps us continue providing care for Veterans. Over time, more vaccines will become available. We'll then offer a COVID-19 vaccine to all Veterans enrolled in VA health care who want one.

If you have more questions about getting a COVID-19 vaccine, you can send a secure message to your provider. To learn more about COVID-19 vaccines, [go to the CDC website.](#)

15. If the FDA authorizes more than one COVID-19 vaccine, will I be able to choose which one I receive?

Most likely, no. For the first several months we wouldn't have enough vaccine to allow for this. We will reassess as more vaccines become available. Over time, when more vaccines become available the plan is to offer a free COVID-19 vaccine to all Veterans enrolled in VA health care who want one.

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16. Who is considered to be high-risk for COVID-19?

We know that people have a higher risk of getting and spreading COVID-19 if they live in places like nursing homes or other group care settings. Health care providers also have a higher risk of getting and spreading COVID-19 through their work caring for others.

We also know that the risk of getting very sick or even dying from COVID-19 increases with age. People who have certain health problems (like diabetes, cancer, or heart disease) also have a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and data shows that people from some racial and ethnic groups have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

To learn more about people at increased risk, [go to the CDC website](#).

17. If I'm a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, am I at greater risk of getting COVID-19?

Members of certain racial and ethnic minority groups are at higher risk of being infected with or dying from COVID-19. Racial and ethnic minority groups make up 40% of the U.S. population, but account for about 50% of COVID-19 deaths.

We strive to ensure that all Veterans receive high-quality COVID-19 care when they need it. Our data shows that survival rates for Veterans treated for COVID-19 at VA health facilities do not differ by race or ethnicity. We're also considering the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnicity minority groups as we plan for how to offer COVID-19 vaccines to Veterans.

Getting Vaccinated

18. How many doses of a COVID-19 vaccine will I need to take? Will I need a booster dose?

The number of doses you'll need of a COVID-19 vaccine will vary depending on the vaccine. The first two COVID-19 vaccines that we expect the FDA and the CDC to review each require two (2) doses, given 21 to 28 days apart.

Vaccine experts will need to continue studying the data to determine if and when people will need additional vaccine doses to maintain protection from COVID-19.

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For answers to more frequently asked questions about COVID-19 vaccines, [go to the CDC website](#).

19. How long will the vaccine protect me from COVID-19?

We won't know how long protection will last until we have an authorized vaccine and more data on how well it works. For answers to more frequently asked questions about COVID-19 vaccines, [go to the CDC website](#).

20. Can I receive the COVID-19 and flu vaccines at the same time? If not, how long do I have to wait between vaccines?

We expect the CDC to recommend against getting both the flu and COVID-19 vaccines at the same time. The CDC will provide this guidance when a vaccine is authorized or approved and clinical trial results are available for review.

If the CDC recommends getting both vaccines separately, we'll follow their guidance on how much time to wait between the vaccines.

For answers to more frequently asked questions about COVID-19 vaccines, [go to the CDC website](#).

20. Will I be able to get the vaccine through my VA-approved community provider?

The COVID-19 vaccines that we expect to be authorized for use first require special storage and handling. Because of this, we'll start by offering vaccines through certain VA Medical Centers. When more vaccines are available, we'll determine if we can provide vaccines through our community provider network.

21. Will I have to pay a copay for the COVID-19 vaccine?

We don't charge Veterans who are enrolled in VA health care a copay for vaccinations provided during a health visit. At this time, we're not planning to charge any fee for the COVID-19 vaccine.

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Safety

22. Will VA monitor COVID-19 vaccination reactions?

Yes. We'll closely monitor everyone who gets a COVID-19 vaccine for reactions, side effects, or adverse events. An adverse event is an injury or harm that happens to someone after they receive a vaccine, which may or may not have been caused by the vaccine. We'll report this information in our vaccine monitoring and tracking system. This is the same system we use to monitor reactions to all vaccines, including those for the flu and shingles.

Education

23. Where can I get the latest accurate COVID-19 vaccine information?

The best sources for timely, accurate information are government websites. The FDA and CDC websites offer general vaccine information and will continue to add information about specific COVID-19 vaccines as it becomes available.

[Go to the FDA website.](#)

[Go to the CDC website.](#)

Vaccine Data Sharing

24. If I get a COVID-19 vaccine from VA, what data will VA share with the CDC?

We'll share the same information with the CDC that we share for other vaccines. This includes the following information:

- Demographic information (like your age, gender, race, and ethnicity) that helps the CDC understand which groups of people are receiving the vaccine
- Adverse reactions to the vaccine

We will not share names or street addresses.

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Clinical Trials

25. Is VA participating in clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines? If so, can I participate?

Yes. More than 50 VA Medical Centers across the country are recruiting volunteers to participate in COVID-19 vaccine trials. These include Phase 3 clinical trials for vaccines developed by Moderna, AstraZeneca, and Janssen.

Anyone age 18 or older can sign up for our research volunteer list. You don't need to be a Veteran or enrolled in VA health care. Your decision to join a study or not won't affect your VA health care or any of your VA benefits or services in any way.

We especially want to make sure that any vaccines or treatments work in the people most affected by COVID-19. Data shows this includes people over age 65, people with chronic (long-term) health conditions, and Black, Hispanic, and Native American people.

[Learn more about volunteering for coronavirus research at VA.](#)