COVID-19 Vaccines – Frequently Asked Questions

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is caused by a new virus called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus type 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Anyone can be infected, but older people and people with health conditions like diabetes and hypertension are more likely to get a severe illness or die from COVID-19.

Limited supplies of COVID-19 vaccine are becoming available following Emergency Use Authorizations (EUA) by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Additional vaccines are undergoing clinical trials.

At this time, the two vaccines approved for EUA's are administered in phases, focusing on the first recipients being healthcare providers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Health is working with the Missouri Department of Health and Human Services, the St. Louis Pandemic Task Force, and Federally Qualified Health Centers in the City of St. Louis to provide vaccinations to residents as the vaccine moves through its phased distribution.

How do vaccines work?

Vaccines stimulate the human body's own protective immune responses so that, if a person is infected with a virus or bacteria, the immune system can quickly prevent the infection from spreading disease. In this way, vaccines mimic natural infection but without actually causing the person to become sick.

For SARS-CoV-2, antibodies bind to and block the protein on the virus's surface, preventing the virus from entering our cells and initiating COVID-19, the disease caused by SARS CoV-2.

Not everyone infected with SARS-CoV-2 develops COVID-19. Some people do not develop symptoms after being infected, but they can still spread the virus to others. This is called asymptomatic infection. Most vaccines do not completely prevent infection but do prevent the infection from spreading within the body and from causing disease. Many vaccines can also prevent transmission, potentially leading to herd immunity. This occurs when the unvaccinated people are protected from infection by the vaccinated people around them because they have reduced exposure to the virus.

How is the process for approving a vaccine moving so quickly?

Traditionally, it has taken many years to develop a vaccine, prove its safety and effectiveness, and produce the vaccine in sufficient quantities for public use. This timeline is shortened for SARS-CoV-2 vaccines in development. There are several ways this has been made possible:

1. Some clinical trials have combined phases 1 and 2 to assess the safety and immune responses.
2. Because of the high number of new cases of COVID-19 in many places, differences in disease risk between those who received the viral vaccine and those who received the placebo or comparison vaccine can be measured more quickly than in the absence of a pandemic.
3. The United States government and others have heavily invested in building the manufacturing capacity to produce large numbers of vaccine doses before phase 3 trial findings are available. Typically, vaccine manufacturers wait until the phase 3 trial is completed and shows safety and efficacy before making such a large investment in manufacturing capacity.

None of these factors contributing to the accelerated development of a vaccine for SARS-CoV-2 imply that safety, scientific or ethical integrity are compromised or that short-cuts have been made.

When do you expect a vaccine to arrive in St. Louis?

The City of St. Louis Department of Health has been working closely with federal, state and local officials and the health care community to prepare for the arrival of a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine. Following the Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on December 11, 2020, Pfizer began shipments of its vaccine with two days. The first publicized dose of the Pfizer vaccine administered in the St. Louis region was on Monday, December 14, 2020, to an infectious disease specialist at Mercy Hospital.

Additional vaccines are under review and may be granted a EUA by the end of 2020. Per federal guidelines, the vaccine will first be given to those at highest risk for COVID-19 infection.

Are there age restrictions on who can receive the vaccine?

Age indications for each FDA approved vaccine is below:

- Pfizer-BiNTech COVID-19 Vaccine
  - This vaccine is approved for persons 16 years of age and older.
- Moderna mRNA-1273 COVID-19 Vaccine
  - This vaccine is approved for persons 18 years of age and older.

Who will get a vaccine first?

At first, there will not be enough doses available for everyone at once, so residents will get the vaccine in phases. The federal government has recommended that first doses of vaccine (Phase 1) go to people at highest risk for COVID-19, including health care workers, first responders, and residents and staff of congregate care settings, including nursing homes.

The general public (those not falling into one of the higher risk categories) is not expected to be offered a vaccine until later in 2021.

The City of St. Louis Department of Health and the health care community have considered input from the federal [Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices](#) (ACIP) and the [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine](#) (NASEM) to guide prioritization in our jurisdiction.

The City of St. Louis places equity and justice as core principles of its recommendations, going further than national recommendations by prioritizing all COVID-facing health workers, not only health care providers but also healthcare foodservice and facility workers. Similarly, home health workers, including personal care attendants, are prioritized recognizing their important role in providing services to vulnerable individuals and the fact that they often reside in communities highly affected by COVID-19.

Vaccine prioritization will occur in phases:

  (Phased distribution of COVID-19 vaccine began in December 2020 and will continue for several months in 2021 as additional vaccine is made available.)

1. **Phase 1**: Approved vaccines start to go to 5 priority groups (listed in order of priority):
   - Clinical and non-clinical health care workers doing direct and COVID-facing care
   - Long term care facilities, rest homes and assisted living facilities
   - Police, fire and emergency medical services
   - Congregate care settings (including corrections and shelters)
   - Home-based health care workers
   - Health care workers doing non-COVID-facing care
   - Populations disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (communities of color)
2. **Phase 2** (listed in order of priority):
   - Individuals with 2+ co-morbid conditions (high risk for COVID-19 complications)
   - Early education, K-12, transit, grocery, utility, food and agriculture, sanitation, public works and public health workers
   - Adults 65+
   - Individuals with one co-morbid condition
   - Populations disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (communities of color)
3. **Phase 3**: Vaccine is expected to be available to the general public.

When will residents of nursing homes receive the vaccine?

Residents of long-term care facilities are being prioritized in Phase 1 of vaccination. The federal government has contracted with Walgreens and CVS to go to all facilities during Phase 1 to vaccinate staff and residents.

How do we know if the vaccine is safe?

A vaccine will not be distributed in Missouri until the FDA determines the vaccine is safe.

It's important to know that vaccines go through more testing than any other pharmaceuticals. Before any vaccine is made available, it must go through rigorous development and testing. Manufacturing is critical — every dose must consistently be of high quality. Additionally, extensive testing in clinical trials is conducted to prove safety. First, small groups of people receive the trial vaccine. Next, a vaccine is given to people with particular characteristics (e.g., age and physical health). Then, a vaccine is given to tens of thousands of people and tested for effectiveness and safety.

After that, the data is reviewed by the FDA, which approves the vaccine, and by an independent board, CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), which will make its recommendations for use. These bodies are the final safeguards for the public, ensuring any vaccine is both safe and effective.

What will be done to prioritize those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19?

The City of St. Louis Department of Health and its regional partners are working closely to establish a distribution plan that prioritizes populations disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. As public health planners and practitioners, we are committed to engaging these communities in a meaningful way in the planning process and will build on longstanding community relationships and develop a robust community engagement approach to ensure access.

Can someone get COVID-19 from the vaccine?

No, it is not possible to get COVID-19 from vaccines. Vaccines against SARS-CoV-2 use inactivated virus, parts of the virus (e.g., the spike protein), or a gene from the virus. None of these can cause COVID-19.

Will we still need to wear masks and practice physical distancing once a vaccine is available?

Yes, people will still need to wear masks and practice social distancing (remaining 6ft away from others, especially those who do not live in your household) until a large percentage of the population is vaccinated and we are sure the vaccine provides long-term protection. At first, we will not have enough vaccine to vaccinate everyone who wants the vaccine and the virus will still spread in our communities.

Once the vaccine is available, where can I go to get a COVID-19 vaccine?

Public vaccine clinics, including those that will provide a COVID-19 vaccine when available, can be found at CDC's interactive website: vaccinefinder.org. Once a vaccine is widely available, you can also check with your primary care provider, local pharmacy or local health department. Information will also be available on the City of St. Louis Department of Health website.

How many vaccines and what types are in development?

Dozens of vaccines are now in development, and several are moving toward final authorization. All but one of the COVID-19 vaccines currently in Phase 3 clinical trials in the United States require two shots. The first shot starts building protection. A second shot a few weeks later is needed to get the most protection the vaccine offers. One vaccine in Phase 3 clinical trials only requires one shot.

The U.S. government's Operation Warp Speed initiative goal is to produce and deliver 300 million doses of safe and effective vaccines with the initial doses available before the end of 2020.

Who is authorized to administer vaccinations?

In addition to licensed health care providers, like doctors and nurses and pharmacists, according to the federal CARES Act, vaccinations may be administered by pharmacy interns, certified pharmacy technicians, paramedics, and certified medical assistants, under the direct supervision of a primary care provider. When available, all health care institutions, including hospitals, community health centers, and private medical offices, will have access to the COVID-19 vaccine to vaccinate their patients. Pharmacies, including large retail outlets such as CVS, Walgreens, Jewel-Osco, and Walmart, will have access to the vaccine and will be able to vaccinate their customers. Vaccines will likely also be made available to local health departments and Federally Qualified Health Centers for vaccinating local residents at public clinics.

Will I have to pay for the vaccine?

The vaccine is being provided free of charge to all individuals by the federal government. Insurance companies are also committed to not charging any out-of-pocket fees or co-payments related to the COVID-19 vaccine administration. All health care provider sites that receive the COVID-19 vaccine must agree not to charge patients any out-of-pocket fees or deny anyone vaccination services.

Where can I get more information?

Visit these frequently updated Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) web pages on COVID-19 vaccination:

- Benefits of Getting a COVID-19 Vaccine
- How COVID-19 Vaccines Work
- Myths and Misconceptions about COVID-19 Vaccines
- Frequently Asked Questions about COVID-19 Vaccination (newly expanded)