

# COVID-19 vaccine frequently asked questions

Updated: January 22, 2021

## Vaccine availability

### When can I get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Mass General Brigham is following federal and state guidance from public health officials for vaccine distribution. The first wave of people who are getting the vaccine are frontline health care workers and first responders. Patients in long-term care facilities and nursing homes are also getting the vaccine.

Currently, Massachusetts [public health officials](#) think the general public will be able to get the vaccine sometime between April and June 2021. Access will be coordinated through the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. If you are [high-risk](#), are 75 and older, or work in certain jobs like education, transit, or public works, you might be able to receive the vaccine sooner, between February and April. We will continue to update [our website](#) as more information becomes available. If you live in another state, please check your state's information.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has more information on their website about when the vaccine may be [available to the general public](#).

### If I am 65 years old, can I get the vaccine now that the CDC has changed its guidance?

Recently, the federal government announced that states may choose to offer the vaccine to those age 65 years and older. The state of Massachusetts is currently planning to offer the vaccine to those age 75 years and over beginning in February. We are aware that Massachusetts is evaluating the federal government's recent announcement, but it is currently unknown if Massachusetts will change the age criteria in its vaccination priorities. If Massachusetts does make any changes to its current plans, we will follow the state guidance and will notify patients of any changes through [Patient Gateway](#) (the Mass General Brigham online patient portal) and on our website ([massgeneralbrigham.org](https://massgeneralbrigham.org)).

### Where will I be able to get the vaccine?

The vaccine will be available to our eligible patients in locations that are easily accessible. This may include some of our medical offices, local pharmacies, local public health clinics, or state vaccination sites. We will continually update our patients about all their vaccination options through Patient Gateway and on our website.

## About the COVID-19 vaccine

### The Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are mRNA vaccines. What does that mean?

Though mRNA vaccines are a new kind of vaccine, researchers have been studying and working on them for many years. They do not contain live virus and cannot cause COVID-19. Instead, they give our cells directions on how to make the COVID-19 proteins found on the outside layer of the coronavirus. Our immune system can then make antibodies to these proteins and protect us from being infected with

COVID-19. The mRNA from the vaccine never enters the nucleus of our cells or gets into our DNA. The CDC has [information about mRNA vaccines](#).

### **Can I get COVID-19 from a vaccine?**

No. The vaccine does not contain the whole or live virus and therefore cannot cause COVID-19.

### **How do we know the vaccine works?**

The COVID-19 vaccine has proven to be extremely effective. According to Phase 3 trials, the [Pfizer vaccine](#) is 95% effective 7 days after the second dose. The [Moderna vaccine](#) is 94% effective 14 days after the second dose. These results were consistent across gender, age, race, and ethnicity.

### **How long will immunity last after I get vaccinated? Will I need to be vaccinated every year?**

We do not know this yet. The clinical trials will continue to monitor participants to see how long protection lasts. We will provide updated information as it becomes available.

Because we don't yet know how long immunity will last, it's still important to [wash your hands, wear a mask, and socially distance](#).

### **I already had COVID-19. Should I get vaccinated?**

Yes, when it becomes available to you, you can still get the vaccine if you have had COVID-19 and have recovered. If you are actively sick with COVID-19 or have [symptoms that could be from COVID-19](#), you should not get the vaccine.

### **Can I get a COVID-19 vaccine with other vaccines?**

When possible, you should avoid getting other vaccines for 14 days before or after you get the COVID-19 vaccine. If you get a COVID-19 vaccine within 14 days of another vaccine, you do not have to get it again.

### **What are the side effects of the vaccine?**

Some people do get side effects after receiving the vaccine. For both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, most mild side effects resolve within a day or so.

- The most commonly reported symptoms from the Pfizer vaccine have been pain at the site of vaccination, fatigue, headache, muscle pain, joint pain, and chills.
- The most commonly reported symptoms from the Moderna vaccine have been pain at the injection site, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, joint pain, swollen lymph nodes in the same arm as the injection, nausea and vomiting, and fever.

## **Masks and social distancing**

### **Can we stop wearing masks and social distancing after getting vaccinated?**

No, not yet. We know that the vaccine protects you from getting sick, but we do not know if it stops you from giving it to other people. Because not everyone will get the vaccine right away, we must be careful to protect others. Even if you get the vaccine, you should still wear a mask, practice social distancing, and wash your hands. Infection control experts will let us know when it is safe to modify or stop these safety measures.



### Why do we need to get the vaccine if we're wearing masks and social distancing?

We need to use all the tools available to us to stop the pandemic. Together, the COVID-19 vaccine and simple everyday actions like wearing a mask and social distancing will offer the best protection from COVID-19. And even though the vaccines are 90% to 95% effective, you still don't know how effective it will be for you. About 5% to 10% of people immunized may still get the virus. You should do everything you can to reduce your risk of getting the virus and passing it to others.

## Allergies

### Should I be concerned about allergic reactions to the COVID-19 vaccine?

There have been some reports of people having allergic reactions after getting the vaccine. A small number of people had a severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. Based on this, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the CDC recommend that people with a history of anaphylaxis to any of the ingredients in the COVID-19 vaccine should not get the vaccine. People with other food or medication allergies can receive the vaccine.

In general, most patients allergic to one vaccine can receive other vaccinations safely. If you have a history of severe allergic reactions to vaccines, injectable therapies, or any component of the COVID-19 vaccine you are going to receive, you should talk to your primary care provider or allergist (if you have one). Your provider can help you decide if it is safe to get vaccinated.

### What are the ingredients in the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines?

The Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines do not contain gelatin, egg, or latex. Also, the vial stoppers are not made with natural rubber latex. Patients who have latex allergies can receive the Pfizer or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines.

Both the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines contain **polyethylene glycol**. Reactions to polyethylene glycol are very rare. Patients with a history of having an allergic reaction to polyethylene glycol should talk to their provider before receiving either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine.

### Ingredients of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines

	Pfizer-BioNTech	Moderna
<b>Active</b>	Nucleoside-modified messenger RNA (modRNA) encoding the viral spike (S) glycoprotein of SARS-CoV-2.	Nucleoside-modified mRNA encoding the viral spike (S) glycoprotein of SARS-CoV-2
<b>Inactive - lipids</b>	(4-hydroxybutyl)azanediylbis(hexane-6,1-diyl)bis(2-hexyldecanoate)	SM-102 (Proprietary to Moderna)
	2[(polyethylene glycol [PEG])-2000]-N,N-ditetradecylacetamide	Polyethylene glycol (PEG) 2000 dimyristoyl glycerol (DMG)
	1,2-distearoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphocholine	1,2-distearoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphocholine
	Cholesterol	Cholesterol



<b>Inactive – salts, sugars, buffers</b>	Potassium chloride, monobasic potassium phosphate, sodium chloride, dibasic sodium phosphate dihydrate	Tromethamine, tromethamine hydrochloride, acetic acid, sodium acetate
	Sugar (sucrose)	Sugar (sucrose)
	The diluent, added to the vaccine for administration, is saline (Sodium Chloride)	No diluent needed

## Immunocompromised patients

### I am immunocompromised. Should I get the COVID-19 vaccine?

The CDC has stated that people who are immunocompromised may receive the COVID-19 vaccines, as long as they have had no issues with getting vaccines in the past. For questions about allergies and the vaccines, please see the allergy frequently asked questions.

Please note, the COVID-19 vaccines are **not** live vaccines; live vaccines are often not recommended for immunocompromised patients.

Patients who are immunocompromised include people:

- Living with HIV
- On immunosuppressive therapies like steroids (prednisone) for a long time
- On immunosuppressive therapies for prevention of organ transplant rejection
- On immune altering medications like biologic therapies (often injectable). These are used for treatment of autoimmune diseases such as Crohn’s disease, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and others.

It is not known how effective the COVID-19 vaccines will be for you. You may have less of an immune response to the vaccine. Even if you get the vaccine, you should still wear a mask, practice social distancing, and wash your hands. This is true for everyone getting the vaccine now. Infection control experts will let us know when it is safe to modify or stop these safety measures. For now, we do not know if you may need long-term boosters or revaccination. Mass General Brigham may not be doing repeat vaccination until everyone is vaccinated.

### Should my immunosuppression medications be altered when I get the vaccine?

In general, we are not recommending altering the immunosuppression before or after vaccination. In specific cases, your provider may recommend changes. If you have questions, consider discussing this during your next medical visit.

### Can I get the COVID-19 vaccine if I have had an organ transplant?

You can get the vaccine. It’s possible that the vaccine may be less effective in providing protection for you. It may be best to wait to get vaccinated at least 3 months after your transplant if possible, in order to improve the immune response to the vaccine (when you are on less immune suppression). There is no preference for the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines. Your transplant provider will tell you if you need transplant labs after vaccination.



**I am waiting for organ transplantation. Should I get the vaccine?**

In general, vaccines work better before organ transplant, before the immunosuppression is started. If possible, we would recommend that you get the vaccine before transplant. We do not currently have mechanisms to expedite that.

## Pregnancy and breastfeeding

**I am pregnant. Should I get the COVID-19 vaccine?**

Vaccination, especially with vaccines that do not contain live virus, are considered a safe and routine part of prenatal care. For example, the flu shot is not only offered during pregnancy but recommended.

In line with recommendations from the CDC, when the COVID-19 vaccine is available for patients, it will be offered to those who are pregnant. However, you should speak with your OB/GYN about whether or not you should get vaccinated. Both the virus and the vaccine are new. There is very little data on the safety of this vaccine in pregnancy as pregnant people were not included in the trials of the vaccines. However, 18 individuals who received the vaccine in the studies did become pregnant after vaccination. So far, those pregnancies are ongoing. We hope to learn more about those individuals soon. Like many new medications and vaccines, the COVID-19 vaccine was studied in pregnant animals, and these studies did not show any complications related to the vaccine.

With the help of your OB/GYN, you can discuss what is the best option for you. This will be based on your risk for exposure to the virus and how sick you might get if you do get the virus.

**If I decide to get the vaccine during pregnancy, does it matter when I get vaccinated?**

The decision about when you get vaccinated should be made together with your OB/GYN. This should consider your risk of exposure to the virus and what your chance of getting very sick might be if you do get the virus. There is no data to suggest that the COVID-19 vaccines cause miscarriage.

**I heard that some people had reactions after vaccination. Are these dangerous in pregnancy?**

Symptoms including fever, muscle aches, joint pains, fatigue, and headache are common side effects of the vaccine (particularly after the second dose). Most mild side effects resolve within a day or two and are not believed to be dangerous. If you are worried about side effects from the vaccine and your pregnancy, talk to your OB/GYN before getting the vaccine.

**I am breastfeeding. Should I get the vaccine?**

When the vaccine is available for patients, it will be offered to breastfeeding individuals. At this time, there is no data regarding the safety of this new vaccine on breastfed infants of mothers who were vaccinated. However, any vaccine that makes it into the breast milk is likely to be quickly inactivated when the milk is digested. In addition, some of your COVID-19 antibodies that you make to develop immunity can pass to the baby through the breastmilk after you receive the vaccine similar to other vaccines.

**Will the vaccine affect my chance of getting pregnant in the future?**

There is no evidence that vaccines affect future fertility.

**What if I become pregnant between the first dose of the vaccine and the second shot?**

You can choose to either get the second dose during pregnancy or wait to get the second dose until



after you have had your baby. Many individuals who have already had the first dose may choose to get the second dose, so that they will become immune during pregnancy.

**I am planning pregnancy in the near future. Should I get vaccinated now or wait?**

The COVID-19 vaccines are not believed to affect your future fertility. Getting vaccinated before you get pregnant may prevent COVID-19 during pregnancy. It can also avoid the need for vaccination during pregnancy. However, whether or not you wait to get vaccinated may depend on when the vaccine is available to you.

## Children

**Can children get the vaccine?**

Currently, the Pfizer vaccine is approved for youth ages 16 and older. The Moderna vaccine is approved for people 18 years of age and older. The initial trials of each of these vaccines were limited to these age ranges and did not include younger individuals.

For youth age 16 and older, distribution and prioritization for the vaccine will be coordinated through the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Currently, Massachusetts [public health officials](#) think the general public will be able to get the vaccine sometime between April and June 2021. Youth who are high-risk might be able to receive the vaccine sooner, between February and April. This will depend on the availability of the Pfizer vaccine.

**When will those 15 and younger be able to get a COVID-19 vaccine?**

Children younger than 12 have not yet been included in trials. It is not yet known when the vaccine might be approved for this age group.

Children's and adults' immune systems are different and can produce different immune responses to vaccines. The vaccines need to be studied in children 15 and younger to make sure they are safe and that they work. Pfizer and Moderna have begun new vaccine trials that include children as young as age 12. Once there is data, it will go through the same U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) review process. The vaccines will be approved if the data shows they are safe and effective. It will likely take several months.

**Will children be vaccinated before the start of the 2021-22 school year?**

As these vaccines are not yet approved for people younger than 16 years old, it is unlikely most children will be vaccinated by the start of the next school year. However, teachers and school staff will have the opportunity to be vaccinated. Teens aged 16 and 17 years may be vaccinated by the beginning of the school year.

## Patients with cancer

**I have cancer. Can I get the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to me?**

Yes. The CDC has stated that people with cancer may receive the COVID-19 vaccines, as long as they have had no issues with getting vaccines in the past.

**Should I get the vaccine if I am actively receiving cancer treatment or should I wait until my treatment course is done?**



If your current treatment includes chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapies, or radiation therapy, the decision about when you get vaccinated should be made together with your care team.

In making your decision, you should consider your risk of exposure to the virus, what your chances of getting very sick might be if you do get the virus, and when your treatment will be finished.

If you are done with treatment, you should get vaccinated when the vaccine is available to you. This includes patients who are still being seen, as part of post-treatment, or are thought of as being in the “survivorship” part of their journey.

### **Will the vaccine interfere with my cancer treatment?**

No. At this time, there is no evidence to suggest that the vaccine will affect your cancer treatment.

### **Can my caregiver get the vaccine?**

Your caregiver (e.g., your spouse or adult child) should talk with their own health care provider to determine if they should get the vaccine when it is available to them.

## **Other Resources**

### **Where can I find more information?**

- Benefits of Getting a COVID-19 Vaccine - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/vaccine-benefits.html>
- When vaccine is limited, who gets vaccinated first? - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations.html>
- COVID-19 Vaccine in Massachusetts - <https://www.mass.gov/covid-19-vaccine-in-massachusetts>
- People at higher risk for severe illness - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#People-at-Higher-Risk-for-Severe-Illness>
- Food and Drug administration Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine - <https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/pfizer-biontech-covid-19-vaccine>
- Food and Drug administration Moderna COVID-19 vaccine - <https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/moderna-covid-19-vaccine>
- Mass General Brigham COVID-19 website - <https://www.massgeneralbrigham.org/covid19>
- Understanding mRNA COVID-19 Vaccines - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines/mrna.html>

