

Patient Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the COVID-19 Vaccine for Adults with a Diagnosis of Cancer or who are receiving Cancer Treatment

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Note: The information contained in these FAQs was correct at the time of writing. Please check <https://www2.hse.ie/covid-19-vaccine/> for the most up-to-date information on the Covid-19 vaccine.

1. How is the COVID-19 vaccine given?

The COVID-19 vaccine is given as an intramuscular injection into the upper arm. The COVID-19 vaccines that are currently being used in the Irish vaccination programme are the AstraZeneca vaccine, the Janssen vaccine, the Moderna vaccine and the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine (also known as ‘Comirnaty’). The AstraZeneca, Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines are administered in a two-dose course. The Janssen COVID-19 vaccine (manufactured by Johnson&Johnson) is administered as a single dose.

2. Is it safe to get the COVID-19 vaccine while receiving cancer treatment?

Yes. The majority of people receiving cancer treatment can have the COVID-19 vaccine. Only patients with a history of serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to a COVID-19 vaccine or any of its ingredients should not receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

If you have a low platelet count or you are currently fighting a severe infection, your healthcare team may advise you when the best time to receive the vaccine is.

3. Are there any contraindications with the COVID-19 vaccine?

Patients with a history of serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to a COVID-19 vaccine or any of its ingredients should not receive the COVID-19 vaccine. The Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines do not contain any latex, animal products or egg proteins and are not contraindicated in egg allergy.

4. I am due for surgery soon. Should I get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes. It is recommended that you get the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible. It is advisable to discuss the timing of vaccination with your surgeon.

5. Will the COVID-19 vaccine give me COVID-19?

No. The COVID-19 vaccine doesn't contain live COVID-19 virus so it can't give you COVID-19.

6. Are COVID-19 vaccines as effective in patients with cancer?

The effectiveness of the vaccine may be lower in those who are immunocompromised, including some people with cancer. The level of immunity generated by the vaccine in patients with cancer may be affected by a range of factors. These include the type of cancer, the type of anticancer treatment, whether you were on treatment at the time you got the vaccine, how healthy your immune system is otherwise and your general level of fitness.

An additional dose has therefore been recommended for people who were immunocompromised at the time of their initial COVID-19 vaccine course¹. Some studies have demonstrated that immunocompromised patients had a lower antibody response to vaccination, which improved with an additional vaccine dose. Further information is available here:

<https://www2.hse.ie/screening-and-vaccinations/covid-19-vaccine/get-the-vaccine/weak-immune-system/>

People who are immunocompromised are advised to continue following public health and infection control advice to reduce their risk from getting COVID-19. Specific advice for how to avoid COVID-19 for people most at risk of severe disease is available on the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) website at the following link:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/peopleatincreasedriskofsevereillness/othersatincreasedriskofsevereillness/>

7. Will I need an additional dose of a COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes, if it is thought possible that you were immunocompromised at the time of your vaccination and may not have mounted a sufficient immune response. This could be either due to your disease or treatment you were receiving.

If this applies to you, you will be offered an mRNA vaccine (Pfizer/BioNTech or Moderna) as an **additional dose** – this is **not** a booster dose. You will receive a third dose of vaccine is to complete your primary vaccination schedule. The mRNA vaccine should be given after a minimum interval of two months (1 month for children aged 5-11 years) following the last dose of an authorised COVID-19 vaccine.

You are likely to be invited for an additional dose if any of the following apply to you:

¹ NIAC advice: <https://rcpi-live-cdn.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Recommendations-re-additional-COVID-19-vaccine-dose-for-those-with-Immunocompromise-FINAL-30082021.pdf>

- you were treated with chemotherapy, targeted therapy, monoclonal antibodies or immunotherapies in the past 12 months
- you are being treated for a blood cancer, or your type of blood cancer may have affected your response to the vaccine
- you have advanced or metastatic cancer
- you are listed for a haematopoietic stem cell transplant (HSCT), underwent a HSCT in the past 12 months, or are on immunosuppressant therapy for Graft-versus-Host disease
- you were treated with radiotherapy since March 2021

If you have had COVID-19 since your last dose of COVID-19 vaccine, then your additional dose should be delayed for 3 months after you got sick.

Further information is available on the NIAC recommendations for an additional COVID-19 vaccine dose for those with immunocompromise associated with a suboptimal response to vaccines [here](#).

8. How will I get my additional vaccine dose?

Patients who would benefit from an additional dose of vaccine are identified by their clinician or GP.

If it is recommended that you receive an additional dose, you will then receive a SMS text message inviting you to make an appointment at a COVID-19 vaccination centre close to where you live.

9. Will I need to get a booster vaccine dose if I had an additional dose?

Yes, a booster dose is recommended for all people over 16 years of age including those who needed an additional dose.

10. How will I get my booster vaccine dose?

Patients who would benefit from a booster dose of vaccine can receive their booster the following ways:

If you are 30 or older, you can:

- book an appointment at a vaccination centre
- book an appointment with a participating pharmacy
- go to a walk-in booster clinic for your age group

If you are aged 16 to 29, you can:

- book a vaccination centre appointment at a clinic for your age group
- book an appointment with a participating pharmacy
- You may also be able to get your booster from your GP

Further information is available here:

<https://www2.hse.ie/screening-and-vaccinations/covid-19-vaccine/get-the-vaccine/weak-immune-system/>

11. Are COVID-19 vaccines effective against different variants such as the delta and omicron variant?

Current evidence suggests that COVID-19 vaccines are effective against known variants.

12. How long does the protection last?

We do not yet know how long the vaccines will give immunity from COVID-19. It is important to note that some people who receive the vaccine, (e.g. people who are immunosuppressed due to an underlying disease or treatment, including some types of cancer or cancer treatments) may not mount an adequate immune response to the vaccine.

13. What are the side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine? Is there a higher risk of side effects for people who are having chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

Most of the known side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine are mild to moderate and usually resolve within a few days after vaccination. There have not been any reports of higher incidence of side effects in patients with cancer.

The most frequent reported side effects are:

- pain at injection site
- feeling tired
- headache
- feeling achy
- low grade fever or chills

After the Moderna vaccine more than 1 in 10 people may get a swollen lymph gland under the arm where you had the injection.

After the Pfizer-BioNTech or Astra Zeneca vaccines more than 1 in 1000 people may get a swollen lymph gland under the arm where you had the injection.

Painkillers may be used to alleviate these side effects, if appropriate, and in consultation with your healthcare team. If a cancer patient reports a high temperature following COVID-19 vaccination, it may be related to infection and should be investigated as appropriate.

Very rare cases of unusual blood clots associated with low platelets have been reported with the Astra Zeneca vaccine. The reported combination of blood clots and low blood platelets is very rare, and the overall benefits of the vaccine in preventing COVID-19 outweigh the risks of side effects². The COVID-19 vaccines are new vaccines and their safety and efficacy will continue to be monitored on an ongoing basis.

Further information on the COVID-19 vaccines can be found here:

<https://www2.hse.ie/screening-and-vaccinations/covid-19-vaccine/>

14. Will the COVID-19 vaccine stop me getting COVID-19?

Vaccinated people may still get COVID-19, but they are unlikely to get severe illness from COVID-19. Getting the vaccine is an important way to help protect yourself from COVID-19. It is also important to continue to follow the general public health advice to help prevent COVID-19, including physical distancing, cough etiquette, wearing face coverings and regular handwashing. The level of protection that you get from the COVID-19 vaccine may vary due to your cancer treatment and your type of cancer.

Your healthcare team will discuss this with you. Some cancers and some cancer treatments can affect the immune system in different ways. It is possible the vaccine might be less effective for people who have a weakened immune system.

² [http://www.hpra.ie/homepage/medicines/news-events/item?t=/statement-from-the-health-products-regulatory-authority-vaxzevria-\(formerly-covid-19-vaccine-astrazeneca\)&id=c65d0f26-9782-6eee-9b55-ff00008c97d0](http://www.hpra.ie/homepage/medicines/news-events/item?t=/statement-from-the-health-products-regulatory-authority-vaxzevria-(formerly-covid-19-vaccine-astrazeneca)&id=c65d0f26-9782-6eee-9b55-ff00008c97d0)

15. Do vaccinated people need to continue following general public health advice to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

Yes. Even if a patient has received the COVID-19 vaccine they should still continue observing public health measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19, including physical distancing, cough etiquette, wearing face coverings and regular handwashing.

16. Should my family have the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes. Anyone else that lives with you and who is eligible for the vaccine should have the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it is offered to them in order to protect you and to protect them. Carers who come in from outside your home to look after you should also get the COVID-19 vaccine.

17. I already had COVID-19, so do I need to get the vaccine?

Yes. Patients who have already had COVID-19 should still receive the vaccine. Re-infection with COVID-19 is possible so it is important to be vaccinated to reduce the risk. If you do get COVID-19 again, the vaccine can reduce the seriousness of your symptoms. Patients should wait until they have fully recovered from COVID-19 before getting vaccinated.

18. Can patients with cancer on clinical trials receive the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes, patients should avail of the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it is offered to them. Your healthcare team will advise on the timing of vaccination in relation to the clinical trial.

19. Can patients with lymphoedema, or those who are at risk of lymphoedema, receive the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes, you can still receive the vaccine but it should be given in the other arm.

20. I had an antibody test after I completed my vaccine course and it showed a low antibody level, does this mean I need an additional vaccine dose?

No. Those who are recommended to receive an additional dose are identified based on clinical diagnosis or treatment history, rather than antibody test results. There is no agreed or recommended antibody level above which indicates a person is protected.

21. I have been recommended to get an additional dose of vaccine but am unable to receive an mRNA vaccine due to a contraindication. What vaccine is recommended for me?

An additional dose of a different type of vaccine (Vaxzevria® (Astrazeneca) or COVID-19 Vaccine Janssen®) can be considered for those with a contraindication or precaution to an mRNA vaccine.

22. Can I get other vaccines at the same time as the additional COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes. The additional dose may be given at the same time or at any interval before or after seasonal influenza vaccine (or any other vaccines). If the additional dose is given at the same time as another vaccine, the vaccines should be given in different arms.

23. My child has cancer and has been vaccinated, are children with cancer to receive an additional vaccine dose?

The recommendation from NIAC is that an additional mRNA vaccine dose should be given to those **aged 5 and older** with immunocompromise associated with a reduced response to vaccines who have completed their primary course. Your child's healthcare team will advise you on whether an additional dose is recommended.

More information on the COVID-19 vaccination is available at:

<https://www2.hse.ie/screening-and-vaccinations/covid-19-vaccine/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/screening-and-vaccinations/covid-19-vaccine/get-the-vaccine/weak-immune-system/>