

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

**Version 5.0 12/04/2021**

*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. When will the Covid-19 vaccine be available?**

Rollout out of Covid-19 vaccines that have been approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) is underway in our health service and clinically vulnerable groups will be vaccinated over the next few months. Other Covid-19 vaccines are in the process of being reviewed by the EMA and will be made available once the EMA is satisfied that they are safe and effective.

### **2. Should patients with cancer and cancer survivors get the Covid-19 vaccine?**

Yes. Patients with cancer or having cancer treatment (including chemotherapy, immunotherapy, hormonal therapy or radiotherapy) should avail of the vaccine as soon as it is available to you, as long as there is no clinical reason why you should not have it.

If you have had a stem cell transplant, talk to your healthcare team about the best time for you to have the vaccine.

Patients with cancer have an increased risk of severe illness from Covid-19. Cancer or cancer treatments can weaken your ability to fight infection. Getting the Covid-19 vaccine offers you some protection from Covid-19. It is possible that the vaccines may be less effective for patients having cancer treatments. However, it is still expected that the vaccines will give most patients with cancer some useful protection against Covid-19.

### **3. When will I receive the Covid-19 vaccine?**

The groups currently being vaccinated against COVID-19 are:

- People aged 65 years and older who live in long-term care facilities (group 1)
- Frontline healthcare workers (group 2)
- People aged 70 and older living in the community – at different stages (group 3)
- People aged 16 to 69 who are at very high risk of severe disease from Covid-19 (group 4 – includes some groups of patients with cancer)

The next groups to be offered Covid-19 vaccination are:

- People aged 65 to 69 who are at high risk of severe disease from Covid-19 (group 5 – includes some groups of patients with cancer)
- Other people aged 65-69 (group 6)
- People aged 16-64 who are at high risk of severe illness from Covid-19 (group 7 – includes some groups of patients with cancer)

The advice remains that you get the vaccine as soon as it is offered to you, regardless of the type of vaccine, in line with government recommendations. If you are due to start any type of cancer treatment, or if you are already receiving cancer treatment, your healthcare team will advise you on the best timing to receive the vaccine.

Further [vaccination information for Groups 4, 5, 6 and 7 is available on hse.ie](#). This information answers questions like

- Who is in each group
- Where they will be vaccinated
- Who will contact them to arrange their vaccination, and
- When they can expect to be vaccinated.

It also gives more detailed information for people in Group 4 (including people with cancer) and where they can expect to be vaccinated based on the illness they have.

#### **4. Where will I receive the Covid-19 vaccine?**

The Covid-19 vaccine will be administered at mass vaccination clinics, nursing homes, GP surgeries, hospitals or community pharmacies. The HSE will tell people in the priority groups where and when they can access the vaccine as it becomes more widely available. They will let you know through advertising or direct invitation when it is your turn to have the Covid-19 vaccine. It is important not to contact the HSE for a vaccination before then. The vaccine will be administered by qualified and trained healthcare workers including hospital doctors, community medical officers, nurses, GPs, pharmacists, dentists and optometrists. Further information will be made available as the rollout progresses.

#### **5. Are patients with cancer included in the priority groups for vaccination?**

Yes, patients with cancer are included in the priority groups defined by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) as being at very high risk or high risk of severe disease from COVID-19. These groups have been allocated into Priority Groups 4, 5 and 7 of the Government's COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy. The priority groups are defined as follows:

**Priority group 4:** People aged **16-69** with a medical condition that puts them at **very high risk** of severe disease and death from COVID-19.

**Priority Group 5:** People aged **65-69** whose underlying condition puts them at a **high risk** of severe disease and death from COVID-19.

**Priority Group 7:** People aged **16-64** who have an underlying condition that puts them at **high risk** of severe disease and death

## **6. 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 Moderna vaccine and the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine (also known as 'Comirnaty'). All of these vaccines are administered in a two-dose course, and the doses should be given at the recommended intervals:

- AstraZeneca: two doses, 12 weeks apart
- Moderna: two doses, 4 weeks apart
- Pfizer/BioNTech: two doses, 4 weeks apart

The first vaccine offers most people considerable protection in the short term, but both vaccines are required to complete the course and a full course of two doses is important for longer protection.

The Janssen Covid-19 vaccine (manufactured by Johnson&Johnson) has been approved and will be offered soon. This vaccine will be administered as a single dose.

## **7. Should I defer/delay my cancer treatment while waiting for a vaccination?**

No. You should not defer or delay your cancer treatment while waiting for a vaccination unless your doctor advises you to do so. If you are due to start cancer treatment or due to undergo cancer surgery, your healthcare team will advise you to avail of the vaccine as soon as it is offered to you, unless clinically contraindicated.

## **8. 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.

### **9. 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.

### **10. 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. If possible, vaccines should be given at least 7 days before surgery to ensure that the side effects of the vaccine are not confused with other side effects related to your operation. However, in situations where this is not possible, the vaccine can be administered less than 7 days before surgery. It is advisable to discuss the timing of vaccination with your surgeon.

### **11. 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.

### **12. Will the vaccine provide protection against Covid-19 immediately?**

No. Depending on which vaccine is administered, it may take between 7-15 days after the second dose (booster dose) for the body to be protected from Covid-19.

- AstraZeneca: Vaccine recipients may not be protected until 15 days after the second dose.
- Moderna: Vaccine recipients may not be protected until 14 days after the second dose.
- Pfizer/BioNTech (Comirnaty): Vaccine recipients may not be protected until 7 days after the second dose.
- Johnson&Johnson: Vaccine recipients may not be protected until 14 days after the dose.

The level of immunity generated by the vaccine in patients with cancer may be affected by a range of factors, including the type of cancer, the type of anticancer treatment, the timing of administration of the vaccine, pre-existing immune dysfunction and general level of fitness. The effectiveness of the vaccine may be lower in those who are immunosuppressed.

Additionally, we do not yet know whether the vaccine will stop people from spreading Covid-19 to others, so even if you have been vaccinated you 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.

### **13. How long does the protection last?**

We do not yet know how long the vaccine 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.

### **14. 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 effects<sup>1</sup>. The Covid-19 vaccines are new vaccines and their safety and efficacy will continue to be monitored on an ongoing basis.

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<sup>1</sup> [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. Will the Covid-19 vaccine stop me getting Covid-19?**

Getting the vaccine is an important way to help protect yourself from getting 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.

### **16. 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.

There are two main reasons for this:

1. We do not yet know whether the vaccine will stop people from spreading Covid-19 to others
2. Not all people will develop an adequate immune response to the Covid-19 vaccine, e.g. people who are immunosuppressed due to an underlying disease or treatment, including some types of cancer or cancer treatments.

### **17. Should my family have the Covid-19 vaccine?**

Yes. Anyone else that lives with you should also 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.

### **18. 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.

### **19. 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.

**20. Are vaccines interchangeable i.e. can one vaccine be used for the first dose and can another brand be used for the second dose?**

No. You should receive the same vaccine and brand for both doses.

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

Yes, but avoid administering the vaccine in the affected limb.

**More information on the Covid-19 vaccination is available at:**

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/covid-19-vaccine-materials/covid-19-vaccine-information-leaflet-a4-version.pdf>

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

<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/199e6-covid-19-vaccine/>