

COVID-19 Vaccine Early Distribution

Veteran Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

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General

1. Is it possible to get COVID-19 from the vaccine?

No. Currently authorized COVID-19 vaccines, as well as those in development, use inactivated virus, pieces of the virus, or a gene from the virus. None of these can cause COVID-19.

2. How do the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines work? And since this is the first use of these vaccines, how do we know they will be successful at preventing COVID-19?

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. mRNA vaccines work by using a piece of a gene from the virus to make proteins that the body's immune system will recognize and make antibodies against. Studies have shown that the authorized vaccines are highly effective in preventing confirmed COVID-19 disease.

Vaccine Plan & Implementation

3. Where can I view VA's COVID-19 vaccination plan?

You can find VA's full COVID-19 Vaccine Plan at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/docs/n-coronavirus/VHA-COVID-Vaccine-Plan-14Dec2020.pdf>

4. How is VA addressing racial and ethnic disparities in their COVID-19 vaccination program?

VA recognizes that Black, Hispanic, and Native American persons have a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and suffering serious or fatal outcomes. VA's COVID-19

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vaccination program addresses this in how it prioritizes Veterans with these higher risk factors. The VA does not prioritize vaccination solely based on race/ethnicity, rather, it prioritizes based on COVID-19 risk factors. The VA recognizes that persons of color may decline to be vaccinated based on historic injustices that have diminished their trust in the healthcare system. The VA is making efforts to reach out to Veterans of color to ensure their concerns are addressed in order to promote their trust in the vaccination program.

Who Will Receive the COVID-19 Vaccine While Supplies Are Limited

5. Is VA following a Risk Stratification Plan for COVID-19 vaccine allocation?

VA continues to prioritize vaccination based on its Risk Stratification Plan and availability of vaccine. VA worked closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other federal partners to develop its Risk Stratification Plan for COVID-19 vaccine allocation. VA began offering the COVID-19 vaccine under this framework to health care personnel (HCP) and Veterans in community living centers and spinal cord injury and disorder units on December 14, 2020, as soon as vaccine was available.

VA's COVID-19 vaccination strategy must balance site-specific resources, facility needs, vaccine availability, hesitancy and status of the pandemic locally, as well as strict storage, handling and transportation parameters of available vaccines. Facilities should follow VA's prioritization framework for patients and staff, but local flexibility is critical to maximizing vaccine access and efficiency, as well as limiting potential vaccine waste.

6. Is VA vaccinating employees who fall in phase 1b before it vaccinates elderly Veterans?

Phase 1b includes elderly Veterans, and facilities can start offering vaccine to persons in 1b when they have made good progress through Phase 1a. VA issued guidance on December 30, 2020, encouraging local flexibility in order to maximize COVID-19 vaccine access and efficiency, as well as limit potential waste. The risk stratification serves as overarching guidance, but vaccine implementation on a large scale requires VA employees to be agile and flexible in order to meet the daily threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For instance, employees who are full-time teleworkers and do no in-person work in the health care facility, are in priority group 1c unless they have conditions that would place them in Phase 1b, such as being age 75 or older, or having a solid organ transplant. However, local facilities may contact a teleworker at the last minute because they have vaccine that needs to be used within hours. Additionally,

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some staff currently working virtually may be critical to continued health care system operations, such as supporting surge capacity for hospital operations and the COVID-19 response.

7. When does VA anticipate having enough vaccine to vaccinate all Veterans and employees who want a vaccine?

VA's ultimate goal is to offer the COVID-19 vaccine to all health care workers and Veterans who choose to be vaccinated. The Biden Administration projects that there will be enough vaccine supply for all Americans by June 2021. The federal government began investing in select vaccine manufacturers to help them increase their ability to quickly distribute large amounts of COVID-19 vaccine. This investment is allowing the United States to start with as much vaccine as possible and continually increase the supply in the weeks and months to follow. Therefore, VA's vaccine quantities will increase over time.

The goal is for everyone to be able to easily get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as large quantities are available. At that point, additional vaccination provider options should be available, including doctors' offices, retail pharmacies, hospitals, and federally-qualified health centers. For more information, please see [CDC coronavirus vaccine FAQs](#).

8. Who will be offered the COVID-19 vaccine while supplies are limited?

Working with the CDC and other federal partners, VA developed a phased plan to benefit the most people. Under this phased plan, we'll first offer vaccines to VA health care personnel and Veterans residing in Community Living Centers or in Spinal Cord Injuries and Disorder Centers. VA will offer vaccination to additional Veterans at high risk of severe illness from COVID-19 after health care personnel have been offered vaccine. Your facility will notify you when vaccine is available for you and provide information on how to schedule a vaccination.

VA based this phased plan on CDC guidelines. VA's phased plan is based on 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.

VA's long-term goal is to vaccinate all Veterans and employees who are interested in receiving it.

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9. Where do Veterans fit in VA's COVID-19 vaccination planned order of priority for vaccination?

VA's most vulnerable Veterans are first on the list in VA's and CDC's phased plan. Our Veterans in VA Community Living Centers and Spinal Cord Injury and Disease Units are being vaccinated in the early phase of vaccine availability. This approach is consistent with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which are being used by VA, federal partners and private sector health care systems and providers across the country. Health care personnel are also high on the list as they are at high risk for becoming infected and work tirelessly to keep the country's health care system functioning during this pandemic. While VA facilities are following VA's prioritization framework for patients and staff, local flexibility is critical to maximizing vaccine access and efficiency and limiting any potential vaccine waste.

Initial vaccine supply is limited, so, we are offering vaccines to Veterans based on their risk of getting infection, risk of significant disease, and the risk of passing it on to others. Your care team will contact you when you are next to receive a vaccine.

10. How will I be notified when I can get the vaccine?

We first offered vaccine to Veterans residing in Community Living Centers or receiving treatment at Spinal Cord Injuries and Disorder Centers. The next phase includes elderly Veterans. While VA facilities are following VA's prioritization framework for patients and staff, local flexibility is critical to maximizing vaccine access and efficiency and limiting any potential vaccine waste.

During this period of limited vaccine supply of vaccine, if your care team determines that you are eligible to receive the vaccine, you will be contacted directly by [Select as appropriate phone/mail/email] when the vaccine is available.

Please note that as the supply of vaccine increases, we will be working with our care teams to let Veterans, who are not considered high-risk, know their options.

Check out the VA website Vaccine Hub at <https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/> for updates as to when vaccine will be available at VA sites.

11. I have a range of medical conditions. Based on these conditions, where do I fall in VA's risk stratification to receive the COVID-19 vaccine?

Supplies of the new COVID-19 vaccines will be limited over the next few months. Because of this, VA is offering vaccine based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance.

This guidance considers both the personal and public health risk factors if a person is infected with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Personal health risk

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factors include older age and certain medical conditions that place a person at high risk for severe illness if they get COVID-19 disease. Public health risk factors include:

1. critical health care workers who need to be healthy to continue caring for patients during the pandemic
2. people who support our essential, non-health systems.

Following CDC guidance, VA started by offering vaccine to Veterans residing in Community Living Centers or Spinal Cord Injuries and Disorder Centers and health care personnel.

If you have questions about how your personal risk for COVID-19 will determine when you can get a vaccine, [send a secure message to your VA health care provider](#). If you don't receive care at VA, contact your primary health care provider. To learn more about people at increased risk, [go to the CDC website](#).

Getting Vaccinated

12. Do I need to pre-register to get the vaccine?

No. Veterans do not have to pre-register to receive the vaccine. Once more vaccine becomes available, staff will reach out to high-risk Veterans to discuss the vaccine, ask about their interest in receiving the vaccine and let Veterans how they can schedule an appointment to be vaccinated, if desired.

Over time, more vaccines will become available. VA's ultimate goal is to offer a COVID-19 vaccine to all Veterans enrolled in VA health care who want one. Check out the VA website [Vaccine Hub](#) for updates as to when vaccine will be available at other VA medical centers.

13. As the FDA has authorized more than one COVID-19 vaccine, will I be able to choose which one I receive?

Most likely, no. In the early distribution phase, VA facilities will either get the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine due to the storage limitations of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. We will reassess as more vaccines become available. Over time, when more vaccines become available VA's goal is to offer COVID-19 vaccine to all Veterans enrolled in VA health care who want one.

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14. Which VA facilities have COVID-19 vaccines?

To see if your local facility has available vaccine, please go to the local facility website. From the left column, choose “Health Care Services.” When the dropdown menu opens, choose “COVID-19 Vaccines.”

15. What happens if I change my mind and decide I do not want to get the COVID-19 vaccine after scheduling a time to get vaccinated?

You can change your mind at any time. Given the limited supply of vaccine, we simply ask that you contact your care team as soon as possible so we can offer the vaccine to another Veteran.

16. Will the vaccine be available in VA clinics closer to where I live, or will I have to drive hours to a VA Medical Center to get it when it's my turn?

VA is currently distributing vaccine to Medical Centers, Outpatient Clinics and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). At the current time, CBOCs are receiving the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine as it does not need the ultra-cold storage required for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Additional facilities, including Outpatient Clinics and CBOCs, will receive vaccine as supplies increase over the next few months.

17. Can Veterans receive the two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines at different VA facilities or other locations?

Veterans must go to the same facility for both COVID-19 vaccine doses. This is necessary as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sends second doses of each vaccine to the same VA facility where the first dose was administered. This not only ensures that there are enough second doses in each location; it also ensures that Veterans will receive the same vaccine (either Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines) for both the first and second dose.

It is important that Veterans receive both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to be fully effective in protecting against COVID-19 vaccine. It is also important that Veterans get both doses from the same company, as there are no studies showing effectiveness or side effects, when the two doses are from different manufacturers.

Veterans who are moving or relocating and have any questions about their ability to get both vaccine doses at the same location should reach out to their care team **before** getting their first vaccine dose.

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18. Will the vaccine be available in the Philippines from VA?

There have been discussions about transporting COVID-19 vaccine to Manila, Philippines, for VA staff and patients, but there is no definite timeline for delivery of COVID-19 vaccines to Manila. VA continues to work with CDC and other governmental partners on this issue.

19. Will the vaccine be available for Veterans living overseas?

Based on Department of State guidance, the U.S. government does not plan on providing COVID-19 vaccinations to U.S. citizens living overseas. U.S. citizens living overseas should follow host-country developments and guidelines for COVID-19 vaccinations.

Side Effects

20. What are the side effects of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine?

According to the FDA's Emergency Use Authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the most common side effects are:

- Fatigue
- Headache
- Muscle aches and pain (myalgia)
- Joint pain (arthralgia)
- Chills
- Injection site pain
- Redness at the injection site
- Fever

For most people, the side effects lasted no more than 48 hours. These side effects are a sign that your immune system is working to build protection against the virus. All participants in clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccines, experienced similar side effects during the trial phase. Serious adverse events were rare.

There is a remote chance that the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine could cause a severe allergic reaction. A severe allergic reaction would usually occur within a few minutes to one hour after getting a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine.
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Signs of a severe allergic reaction can include:

- Difficulty breathing
- Swelling of your face and throat
- A fast heartbeat
- A bad rash all over your body
- Dizziness and weakness

VA is taking precautions to ensure those with a history of a severe allergic reaction to the ingredients in the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, or to other vaccines, do not receive the vaccine. VA is also ensuring that VA clinicians are fully prepared to respond to a severe allergic reaction post vaccination.

21. What are the side effects of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine?

According to the FDA's Emergency Use Authorization for the Moderna vaccine, the most common side effects are:

- Fatigue
- Headache
- Muscle aches and pain (myalgia)
- Joint pain (arthralgia)
- Chills
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Swelling/tenderness in the armpit
- Injection site pain
- Redness at the injection site
- Fever

For most people, the side effects lasted no more than 72 hours. These side effects are a sign that your immune system is working to build protection against the virus. All participants in clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccines, experienced similar side effects during the trial phase. Serious adverse events were rare.

There is a remote chance that the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine could cause a severe allergic reaction. A severe allergic reaction would usually occur within a few minutes to one hour after getting a dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.
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Signs of a severe allergic reaction can include:

- Difficulty breathing
- Swelling of your face and throat
- A fast heartbeat
- A bad rash all over your body
- Dizziness and weakness

VA is taking precautions to ensure those with a history of a severe allergic reaction to the ingredients in the Moderna vaccine, or to other vaccines, do not receive the vaccine. VA is also ensuring that VA clinicians are fully prepared to respond to a severe allergic reaction post vaccination.

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

The COVID-19 vaccines that have been authorized for use as of this time 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 when we can provide vaccines through our community provider network.

23. Can Family Caregivers recognized by the VA get the vaccine?

Yes. Both primary and secondary designated family caregivers of Veterans participating in VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers can be vaccinated and tested for COVID-19 at VA health care facilities. VA is notifying caregivers directly by letter of their ability to receive a vaccine through VA.

Caregivers who are interested in receiving the vaccine will be scheduled when their Veteran becomes eligible to receive the vaccine in accordance with the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\) guidelines](#). Each VA facility will determine when vaccinations can begin based on site-specific resources, needs and vaccine availability. In addition to VA, designated caregivers may also be eligible for vaccine in the state where they live. They should use the location that is most convenient for them, or that will vaccinate them on the earliest date possible.

Caregivers should contact their local Caregiver Support Program Team for additional information.

24. Will a prescription be necessary for a vaccine under an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA)?

If EUAs are issued for COVID-19 vaccines, it is expected that those vaccines may

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be administered without the requirement for an individual prescription for each vaccine recipient from an authorized health care provider. Under an EUA, FDA has an option to waive prescription requirements, if appropriate, depending on the authorized product specifics, authorized use, and/or emergency circumstances. In addition to an EUA, other legal authorities and/or plans may apply to vaccine administration:

- Legal authorities for relevant emergency response agencies (e.g., state, local, tribal and territorial health departments, health care professional licensing boards);
- Standing orders issued by a state health officer or applicable medical control officials or an executive order issued by a governor to authorize certain healthcare providers (e.g., nurses, pharmacists) to administer COVID-19 vaccine;
- State COVID-19 vaccination and emergency response plans; and
- CDC's COVID-19 Vaccination Program.

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.

mRNA vaccines work by using a piece of a gene from the virus to make proteins that the body's immune system will recognize and make antibodies against.

Studies have shown that the authorized vaccines are highly effective in preventing confirmed COVID disease.

Data Sharing

25. 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 vaccine.

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.

26. I get my care from both VA and civilian doctors. Does VA know about the medical conditions I am being treated for by my civilian doctor? It could impact when I am offered vaccination.

VA has information on all care received in VA's health care system, including

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through VA's Community Care Network (CCN). However, if you receive care outside of VA's health care system or CCN, VA would not have record of that treatment unless you or your health care provider (with your written permission) submitted that information directly to VA.

Like VA, the state where you live is also offering COVID-19 vaccinations. Your civilian medical provider may contact you to schedule a vaccination before VA contacts you, if the conditions they are treating you for place you at high-risk of acquiring COVID-19.

27. I received a COVID-19 vaccination outside of VA. How do I ensure evidence of this vaccination is incorporated into my VA medical record?

Veterans who wish to have their COVID-19 vaccine history reflected in their VA medical record will need to provide evidence of vaccination, such as a completed Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Vaccination Record card, to VA. Veterans can provide this information to their primary care team via secure messaging, during a virtual visit, or in person if they already have a scheduled appointment.