COVID-19 VACCINE FAQS

(Updated 12 July 2021)

There's so much information (and misinformation) about COVID-19 – it feels like it's part of almost every conversation, every day, on every communication channel! Now, with the long-awaited vaccines finally starting to arrive in South Africa, the clamour of facts and opinions seems to have become even louder. You may feel relieved, excited and eager about the vaccine – or confused, nervous, even hesitant.

This information aims to cut through the noise and to answer some of the most commonly asked questions about vaccines in general, with the spotlight on COVID-19 vaccines.

What is a vaccine?

A vaccine is a safe and simple way to strengthen your immune system to fight against disease-causing viruses. Vaccines work in different ways. They may (a) introduce a much weakened or inactivated version of the virus into our body cells, (b) introduce a small harmless piece of the virus into our body cells or (c) send instructions to our body cells to make a harmless part of the virus.

None of these methods can make us sick but they all activate our immune systems. The end result of all these vaccine types is that our body has been safely 'introduced' to the virus and has built up its defensive army and 'leaned' how to fight it. Then, if you come into contact with the active virus, you have immunity and you don't get sick, or you get significantly less sick than you would have because you can fight the virus quickly.

Why should I be vaccinated?

Vaccines are an important part of keeping us healthy and saving lives – around the world, they save five lives every minute! Almost all of us have already had a vaccine at some point in our life – in fact, more than 85% of the world's children are vaccinated against at least three diseases in their first year of life.

Why do we need a vaccine for COVID-19?

The COVID-19 vaccine is our best hope of ending the pandemic and life returning to normal. It's the way we can stop lockdowns, go back to work, school and socialising, and let grandparents hug their grandchildren again! If we don't control this virus by vaccinating, it could keep mutating and we could be living with our current reality for many years.

Earlier in the pandemic some people felt that the best way to fight it was for lots of us to get COVID-19 because this would help create immunity or resistance. But we now realise there are problems with this approach: we don't know how long that natural immunity lasts and we also do know that people can get COVID-19 more than once. In addition, more and more information is coming out about 'long-COVID' - the term used to describe health complications and side effects that occur in some people long after having acute COVID-19.

Whilst healthcare workers have learned a lot and got much better at managing COVID-19 since the early months of 2020, there is still no proven cure and thousands of people are still getting very sick and dying from it. This is why, over the past year, it's become increasingly obvious that vaccination against COVID-19 is a very important part of us all getting through this pandemic.

How do the COVID-19 vaccines work?

COVID-19 vaccines work by making your body's immune system recognise and respond to a molecule (called an antigen) found on the surface of the virus. There are different types of COVID-19 vaccines currently available and they work in different ways. Some introduce a deactivated or much weakened (and harmless) version of the virus into the body, others introduce an the antigen (a harmless piece of the virus) into the body, whilst mRNA vaccines deliver instructions to the body's cells that teach them how to make harmless copies of this antigen.

In the end, they all result in your body recognising the threat (whilst not becoming sick or infected) and building up the antibodies and immunity you need to fight the virus. If you do then come into contact with COVID-19 your body has its 'army' ready and waiting and you can fight it more quickly and effectively.

How will I know if the COVID-19 vaccine is safe?

Before we, the public, receive any vaccine, it has to go through rigorous testing and clinical trials, using first small and then larger groups of volunteers.

Only when it's shown to be safe and effective is a vaccine approved by national regulators (in South Africa, this is SAHPRA – the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority), manufactured to very strict and well-controlled standards and then distributed to all of us.

As at mid-July 2021, 3.5 billion people around the world have had a COVID-19 vaccination. In South Africa 4.2 million vaccinations have been given. So far, the safety data on the COVID-19 vaccines in South Africa and around the world has been excellent.

Was the development of the COVID-19 vaccine rushed?

Some people are concerned about how quickly vaccines for COVID-19 are being rolled out, and this is understandable. It's true that the COVID-19 vaccine was developed in record time, but this was not because any safety steps were skipped. The accelerated pace of the vaccine's development 'from lab to jab' was due to:

- Years of research and technology development happening prior to the pandemic
- China rapidly sharing the virus's genetic information
- Some of the testing processes being conducted simultaneously, to gather a lot of data as quickly as possible
- Governments giving money to vaccine developers in advance
- Some vaccines being created using messenger RNA (mRNA), a process which can be easily standardised and scaled up
- Social media enabling the enlisting of trial volunteers and many people around the world being keen to help
- Many volunteers being exposed to the virus because of how widespread and contagious it is – so the trials took less time to see results
- Companies beginning to manufacture vaccines while still waiting for their final authorisation or approval, so that supplies would be ready as soon as authorisation occurred

What is 'herd immunity' anyway?

We hear a lot about herd immunity, because it's seen as the way to control the spread of the virus and end the pandemic. Herd (or population) immunity is when a large proportion of the population has been vaccinated, so they act as a barrier to break the chain of the virus's spread. Herd immunity protects those who aren't vaccinated.Importantly, herd immunity is about protecting people by vaccinating them so they don't get sick; it's not about exposing as many people as possible to the virus, letting them get sick and just hoping they don't die or suffer long-term symptoms.

How well do the COVID-19 vaccines work?

Information on the vaccines is constantly being updated. However, so far evidence indicates that the vaccines are extremely effective at preventing severe illness/hospitalisation and death against all the COVID-19 variants discovered to date.

It is possible to get COVID-19 if you have been vaccinated, but you are unlikely to get severe COVID-19 or end up in hospital or die from it. Vaccinations take some time to work and you are only well protected about 30 days after your last vaccination (although some protection starts from about 20 days after your first vaccination).

Who will receive the COVID-19 vaccine in South Africa?

Initially, the vaccine is being given to adults in South Africa, with the goal being to vaccinate as many of us as possible as soon as possible. To get so-called 'herd immunity', it's estimated that 67% of the population should be vaccinated – that's about 40 million people in this country. Eventually children and teenagers may receive it too.

How can I get my COVID-19 vaccine?

When it's your age-group's turn to be vaccinated , you'll be able to register on the government's electronic vaccination data system (EVDS).
The link to register is: http://vaccine.enroll.health.gov.za/. You can also register by dialling *134*832# or WhatsApp the word REGISTER to 0600 12345.

This registration is mandatory before receiving a vaccine. If you are in the correct age group and have provided all the necessary details (name, passport/ID number, cell phone number and work or home address), the EVDS will send an SMS confirming your successful registration.

Once you have successfully registered on the EVDS (and received SMS confirmation of this), current options available for vaccination include:

- Receiving an SMS from the EVDS giving you a place and time to get your vaccine
- Walking into a local vaccine site (there are public health sites and private sites). Without an appointment you may wait a little longer but you may still get your vaccine
- Booking an appointment at a private site (Pharmacies, Dischem, Clicks, etc.)
- Booking an appointment through your medical aid
- Being vaccinated by a mobile unit that comes to your area
- If you are struggling to register on the EVDS many vaccination sites will help you do it on the spot (f you are in the age group currently being vaccinated) and then you can have your vaccination

You can find active vaccination sites in your area here: https://sacoronavirus.co.za/active-vaccination-sites/

COVID-19 vaccinations are free in South Africa. You will not have to pay anything. Just take your ID or passport with you. If you belong to a medical aid, take your medical aid card with you.

How is the COVID-19 vaccine given?

If you get a single-shot vaccine (e.g. J&J) it is given as one injection in your arm. If you are receiving a two-shot vaccine (e.g. Pfizer) it will be given as two injections in your arm, a few weeks apart. When you have your first injection the healthcare worker vaccinating you will give you the date to return for your second one. If you are being given a two-shot vaccine, it's very important that you return for the second shot.

Will I have side effects from the vaccine?

You might experience side effects, but this doesn't mean the vaccine isn't safe – instead, it's a sign that your body's immune system is responding to it. If you're a parent, you'll remember that the clinic nurse told you the same thing when you gave your child their vaccinations before they started school.

Side effects from the COVID-19 vaccine include pain at the site of the injection in the upper arm, feeling unwell, tired or feverish and having a headache. These side effects tend to be at their worst a day after the vaccine, and usually get better by Day 5.

But I've heard of people having serious side effects

To date, reports of serious side effects from COVID-19 vaccines are extremely rare and in most cases have been effectively treated. Side effects are being carefully monitored around the world under some of the most intense safety scrutiny ever performed on a medication or vaccine. Unfortunately, social media has provided a platform for those wanting to create panic and distrust about the vaccines. You can protect yourself against these false alarms by visiting the trusted information sources mentioned at the end of these FAQs.

I've had allergic reactions to medications in the past. Will I be allowed the vaccine?

Speak to your doctor if you've suffered a severe allergy or anaphylaxis in response to a medication or food in the past. You can still have a COVID-19 vaccine, but your doctor might suggest a particular type of vaccine, or that you take some extra precautions in the hours after your vaccination.

Will I be forced to have the vaccine?

It's in all of our best interests that as many of us as possible receive the vaccine. Being vaccinated protects your friends, family and community by making sure that you don't get sick and pass COVID-19 on to others. But should you choose not to have it, no-one will force you to have the vaccine.

One of the reasons why the virus mutated into a different variant in South Africa is because so many people in small communities got infected. The virus had to find another way to spread so it mutated into something that could reinfect people who had already been infected. To stop these mutations from happening, we need to vaccinate as many people as possible as soon as possible or we may have COVID-19 in our lives for many, many years to come.

What is a 'new variant'?

When a virus makes copies of itself there can be tiny changes (called mutations) to its genetic code. When a virus develops one or several new mutations, it becomes known as a variant of the original virus.

What are the new variants of the virus that cause COVID-19?

In the virus that causes COVID-19, certain mutations involve the spike protein on the virus's surface, which acts like a key to allow the virus into our cells. These changes have created new variants which are able to spread more easily. These new variants, one of which was first detected in South Africa, are being carefully monitored by the international medical community.
Variants that are currently carefully being watched are called 'variants of concern' and are described as a variant that could be any or all of the following: (a) more easily transmissible from one person to another , (b) able to cause more severe disease (e.g. increased hospitalisations or deaths), (c) harder to treat or harder to prevent with vaccines or (d) result in less reliable COVID-19 test results.

At the moment four variants of concern are being monitored:

• **Alpha,** first discovered in the UK and more transmissible than the original virus. May cause more serious disease but this is still under investigation.

• **Beta,** first discovered in South Africa and more transmissible than the original virus. May not respond as well to some treatments and may be more resistant to vaccines (although current evidence shows that vaccines still prevent severe or critical COVID-19)

• **Delta,** first discovered in India. May not respond as well to some treatments and may be more resistant to vaccines (although current evidence shows that vaccines still prevent severe or critical COVID-19). Research is still being done to confirm if this variant causes more severe disease, more hospitalisations and more deaths.

• **Gamma,** first discovered in Japan/Brazil. May not respond as well to some treatments and may be more resistant to vaccines (although current evidence shows that vaccines still prevent severe or critical COVID-19).

Will the vaccine work on these new variants?

As mentioned above, new variants of COVID-19 are characterised by changes to the spike protein on the surface of the virus. The antigen that's targeted by the vaccines sits on this spike protein, which means that some vaccines may not work as well against these variants.

But the good news is that the COVID-19 vaccines that are currently in development, or have already been approved, are expected to provide at least some protection against new virus variants because these vaccines are designed to create an immune response that involves a range of antibodies and cells. Therefore, changes or mutations in the virus should not make vaccines completely ineffective. Research to date supports the fact that the vaccines are protecting against severe illness, hospitalisation or death for all current variants. In the event that any of these vaccines prove to be less effective against one or more variants, it will be possible to change the composition of the vaccines to protect against these variants.

Will the COVID-19 vaccine give me long-term protection from getting the virus?

Unfortunately, we don't yet know for how long you'll have immunity from COVID-19 once you've had the vaccine. Experts are studying this all the time, and we'll keep you updated.

I've had COVID-19. Do I still need to get vaccinated?

Yes. We know that your immunity can wear off and you can get COVID-19 more than once, so you should be offered the vaccine regardless of whether or not you've had the disease. If you have COVID-19 or have recently had it, the South African Department of Health currently recommends that you wait 30 days from when you got infected with COVID-19 before being vaccinated.

If I've had the vaccine, do I still have to wear a mask or social distance?

Yes. While we know that the vaccine will prevent you from getting severely or critically sick, we don't yet know whether some or all of the variants could still make you ill. We also don't yet know if you can still transmit the virus to the people around you. So, for now, in order to protect both yourself and your friends and family, it's important to continue with precautions such as mask-wearing, hand-washing and physical distancing.

And finally … a bit about the impact of vaccines on our world even before COVID-19

The WHO estimates that at least 10 million deaths were prevented between 2010 and 2015 thanks to vaccinations delivered around the world. Many millions more lives were protected from the suffering and disability associated with diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhoea, whooping cough, measles and polio.

In the last decade, more than 1 billion children around the world have been vaccinated. In that time period, approximately 196 children were affected by a vaccine safety issue. This translates to 0,0000196%! Safety issues have caused zero deaths in the last 25 years.

Vaccines have saved and protected millions of lives – and now they will save millions more, protecting us all from COVID-19!

Where can I find reliable information about COVID-19?

Sites with general information about COVID-19:

- Covid-19 South Africa online resource and news portal
- The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD)
- World Health Organization (WHO): Novel coronavirus
- US Centers for Disease Control (CDC): Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)
- US Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center

Tools tracking vaccines:

- Financial Times: Covid-19 vaccine tracker: the global race to vaccinate
- Our World in Data: Coronavirus (Covid-19) vaccinations
- Bloomberg: Covid-19 tracker