

COVID-19 VACCINATION

Information for people affected by cancer

With Australia's COVID-19 vaccination program now underway, there are many questions being raised by patients, families and carers affected by cancer. This fact sheet addresses some of these questions about the COVID-19 vaccines.

Recommendation for cancer patients

Some types of cancer and their treatment increase the risk of catching COVID-19 and having a more severe illness. Vaccination against COVID-19 is therefore highly recommended. The vaccine reduces your risk of getting sick from COVID-19 and helps reduce the chance of spreading COVID-19 to others.

How your immune system responds to the vaccine may be influenced by your own general health and your cancer treatment. We know from studies of COVID-19 vaccine in patients with cancer that the level of response or protection from vaccination may be lower compared to people without cancer.

Even after receiving the vaccine, it is important for people affected by cancer and their close contacts to continue protective measures including physical distancing, hand hygiene and the use of masks

Such measures help prevent infection. In addition, early testing if you develop symptoms is important as there are treatments available that could help reduce the severity of infection.

Vaccine safety

There are three COVID-19 vaccines available in Australia – Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca. All three vaccines have passed Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration's assessment

and approval processes that assess vaccine safety, quality, and effectiveness.

They do not contain the live virus that causes COVID-19 and therefore there is no risk of catching the infection from the vaccines.

All individuals should follow Australia-wide advice on which vaccines to take, based on their age and medical history.

Number of doses

With a lower response to vaccination, it is recommended that people aged 12 years and over who are immunocompromised get three doses of COVID-19 vaccine to provide the best immunity. While this will likely be most people with cancer on active treatment such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or targeted therapy, not all people affected by cancer will need a third dose. To check your eligibility, visit the [Victorian Government website](#) or speak with your treating team.

Time between doses

For Pfizer, the first two doses are given at least 21 days apart. For Moderna, the first two doses are given four weeks apart. For AstraZeneca, the first two doses can be given four to 12 weeks apart, but it is recommended that doses should be 12 weeks apart for optimal efficacy and six weeks apart during a significant COVID-19 outbreak. Where a third dose is needed, it is recommended this is administered between two and six months following the second dose.

Vaccination and cancer treatment

While it is ideal to get vaccinated before starting treatment, a patient receiving cancer treatment (chemotherapy, radiotherapy) can still safely get vaccinated. Your doctor will be able to discuss timing of vaccination with you, as with some therapies it may be preferable to avoid vaccination during certain treatment periods. This is to avoid confusion around possible side effects and whether they have been caused by the vaccine or your cancer treatment.

Patients with blood cancer

People with a blood cancer diagnosis (myeloma, lymphoma or leukaemia) are at increased risk of complications from COVID-19 infection. Vaccination against COVID-19 is therefore highly recommended, as long as the person does not have a serious allergy to components of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Stem cell transplants

For people who have had an autologous or allogeneic stem cell transplant, vaccination is recommended at least three months after your transplant. Even if you have been vaccinated for COVID-19 prior to the transplant, vaccination with three doses after your transplant is recommended.

Side effects

Common side effects from the vaccine have typically been mild and short-lived – like pain or redness at the injection site. Up to half of all vaccinated people will experience some general side effects such as tiredness, headache, muscle aches and fever. You should seek medical advice if, for example, you develop a fever, with shivering and sweating or if unexpected symptoms such as severe headache or chest pain appear or persist following vaccination.

Previous severe reactions to vaccinations

If you have had a severe allergic reaction to a vaccine in the past, or to a particular type of the COVID-19 vaccine, you should discuss the type of reaction you had with your doctor. You may be referred to specialised vaccination clinics for further assessment and, if suitable, for vaccination under close supervision.

COVID-19 and other vaccines

The current recommended gap between a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine and other vaccines such as the flu vaccine, is at least seven days.

Where can you get vaccinated?

The COVID-19 vaccines are available in [state-run vaccination centres](#), general practices and community pharmacies. Visit the [Department of Health website](#) for more information.

Further information

- Australian Department of Health [COVID-19 vaccine webpage](#)
- Cancer Australia's [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about the COVID-19 vaccines
- Melbourne Vaccine Education Centre's [Frequently Asked Questions on COVID-19 vaccines](#)
- National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance [Frequently Asked Questions on COVID-19 vaccines](#)
- [National Coronavirus Helpline](#): **1800 020 080**. Ask for an interpreter if needed.
- Anyone affected by cancer can contact [Cancer Council](#) on **13 11 20** for information and support. Available 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. If you need a translator to use this service, call **13 14 50**.
- Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre patients on active treatment can contact their [Peter Mac Patient Navigator](#) Monday to Friday, 8.00am - 4.30pm or call the main reception on **(03) 8559 5000**

Patients on active treatment at other health care facilities should contact their treating team.

*In the event of an emergency, please dial **000** for an ambulance.*

