

COVID-19 FACTSHEET AND FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)



What is vaccination and how does it work?

Vaccination is a simple, safe, and effective way to protect people against harmful infections, before they come into contact with them. It uses your body's natural defences to build resistance to specific infections and makes your immune system stronger.

Vaccines help your immune system to create antibodies, just as it does when it is exposed to infection. When you get a vaccine, your immune system responds as follows:

- Recognises the invading particles of the vaccine and produces antibodies. Antibodies are proteins produced naturally by the immune system to fight infection.
- Remembers the infection and how to fight it. If you are then exposed to the virus in the future, your immune system can quickly destroy it before you become unwell.

Because vaccines contain only killed or weakened forms of germs like viruses or bacteria, **they do not cause the infection or put you at risk of its complications.**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

Why should I get vaccinated?

Two key reasons to get vaccinated are to protect ourselves and to protect those around us. Because not everyone can be vaccinated – including very young babies and those who are seriously ill or have certain allergies – they depend on others being vaccinated to ensure they are also safe from vaccine-preventable infections.

For example, in South Africa we need to immunise at least 60% of the people to interrupt the epidemic.

Is it safe to get vaccinated?

Vaccines undergo rigorous testing for safety and efficacy, based on trial data from thousands of participants across the globe. Several national and international regulatory agencies have closely examined the COVID-19 vaccines for safety and effectiveness.

In South Africa we have an additional layer of safety. The SA Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) looks at all the scientific data to ensure the vaccine is safe, effective, and a quality product.

Additionally, because COVID-19 vaccines were developed speedily, all regulators globally have put extra mechanisms in place to monitor the safety of vaccines through global collaborations.

What are the types of vaccines available in South Africa, and how many doses do I need?

South Africa is currently using two vaccines: Johnson and Johnson's (J&J) and Pfizer-BioNTech.

The J&J vaccine requires only one administration. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine requires 2 doses. The second dose should be received at least 21 days after the first dose, however it may be given up to 6 weeks (42 days) after the first dose if necessary.

You should not get the second dose earlier than the recommended interval.

If I have already had COVID-19, do I still need to get vaccinated?

Yes, you should be vaccinated regardless of whether you have had COVID-19 or not. That is because experts do not yet know how long you are protected from getting sick again after recovering from COVID-19. Even if you have already recovered from COVID-19, it is possible that you could be infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 again.

If you were treated for COVID-19 with monoclonal antibodies or convalescent plasma, you should wait 90 days before getting a COVID-19 vaccine. Talk to your doctor if you are unsure what treatments you received or if you have more questions about getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

Can I choose which COVID-19 Vaccine I get?

You cannot choose which vaccine you get. This is determined by the National Department of Health based on vaccine availability, as well as vaccine allocation to each vaccination site

How long does it take for immune protection to kick in after my vaccination?

Immunity builds over a few weeks after vaccination. With both the J&J and Pfizer vaccines, significant immune protection will be reached after 4 weeks.

Do I need to pay to get vaccinated?

No. The government has reiterated that the vaccine will be administered for free at points of care for all South Africans.

Medical schemes are also required pay for the vaccine in full, and members will not be liable for a co-payment. For GEMS members, the vaccine will be paid from the risk benefits, therefore preserving member's day-to-day benefits.

As per the National Department of Health's circular 01 / 04 June 2021, members not covered by a medical aid ought to go to a state facility and those covered by a medical aid can go to a private facility.

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What are the most common side effects of getting vaccinated?

After getting vaccinated, you might have some side effects, which are normal signs that your body is building protection.

Common side effects include pain, redness, and swelling in the arm where you received the shot, as well as tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, fever, and nausea throughout the rest of the body. These side effects could affect your ability to do daily activities, but they should go away in a few days. If the side effects do not go away, you are advised to consult your doctor.

Can I get vaccinated if I am pregnant?

You should discuss your individual situation (particularly if you have other medical conditions) and the benefits and risks of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine while pregnant with your midwife or doctor.

How long does protection from the COVID-19 vaccine last?

We do not know how long protection lasts for those who are vaccinated. What we do know is that COVID-19 has caused very serious illness and death to a lot of people. If you get COVID-19, you also risk infecting loved ones who may get very sick. Getting a COVID-19 vaccine is a safer choice.

Experts are working to learn more about both natural immunity and vaccine-induced immunity.

If I have an underlying condition, can I get a COVID-19 vaccine?

Vaccination is an important consideration for adults of any age with certain underlying medical conditions because they are at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

People with underlying medical conditions can receive a COVID-19 vaccine as long as they have not had an immediate or severe allergic reaction to a vaccine or to any of the ingredients in a vaccine.

Will the COVID-19 mRNA vaccine change my DNA?

No. They do not affect or interact with our DNA in any way. The mRNA vaccine never enters the nucleus of the cell, which is where our DNA (genetic material) is kept. Once your body receives the mRNA vaccine your immune system starts to mount an immune response and make antibodies that will protect you from COVID-19 infection.

What is Herd Immunity?

When a person gets vaccinated against an infection, their risk of infection is also reduced – so they are far less likely to spread the infection to others. As more people in a community get vaccinated, fewer people remain vulnerable, and there is less possibility of passing the infection from person to person. Lowering the possibility for the infection to spread in the community protects those who cannot be vaccinated due to other serious health conditions from the infection targeted by the vaccine. This is called "herd immunity."

"Herd immunity" exists when a high percentage of the population is vaccinated, making it difficult for infectious infections to spread, because there are few people who can be infected. Herd immunity, however, only works works if most people are vaccinated.

How long do I need to wait between my different vaccinations? E.g. Flu and COVID-19?

You'll need to wait at least 2 weeks between the COVID-19 vaccine and influenza (flu) vaccine.

Is it safe for children to get vaccinated?

No. Other international bodies have approved the use of vaccines in children, however, this has not been approved by the South African regulating authorities.

In South Africa, children under the age of 18 are not part of the National COVID-19 vaccination rollout programme.

Can I get a vaccine if I'm breastfeeding?

Yes. There are no safety concerns about giving the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to women who are breastfeeding.

Do I still need to wear my mask if I have been vaccinated?

Even though you are vaccinated you must still follow all precautions:

- Continue to wear a properly fitted mask
- Sanitize your hands
- Wash your hands regularly
- Avoid touching touch your face
- Continue to avoid large gatherings
- Continue to social distance

Can I get vaccinated against Covid-19 while I am currently sick with the virus?

No. People with COVID-19 who have symptoms should wait to be vaccinated until they have recovered from their illness and have met the criteria for discontinuing isolation.

Those without symptoms should also wait until they meet the criteria before getting vaccinated. This guidance also applies to people who get COVID-19 before getting their second dose of vaccine.

The National Department of Health (NDoH) has treatment protocols in place for national medical disasters such as COVID-19 and works with the NICD, to manage such situations. Patient test samples are sent to NICD-accredited laboratories, after which the NICD, with the treating doctor, will recommend the treatment protocol for each patient.

If a member is infected and mildly symptomatic, isolation or quarantine may be prescribed, in some cases at the patient's home. However, the NDoH has designated hospitals to assist patients with more severe illness and to manage the quarantine process. GEMS members may, however, use any private hospital that meets the requirements/protocols for GEMS treatment, as published by the NICD.

The Scheme is aware that this is an evolving and unsettling matter and that the situation may change.

GEMS continues to monitor the situation and will keep members informed of any developments through www.gems.gov.za, social media pages, SMSes and the call centre (0860 00 4367).

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