

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Covid-19 Vaccine: What You Need to Know When You Get the Shot

Doctors answer questions about preparing for the Covid-19 vaccine



A health-care worker administers a Covid-19 vaccination in San Antonio earlier this month.

PHOTO: ERIC GAY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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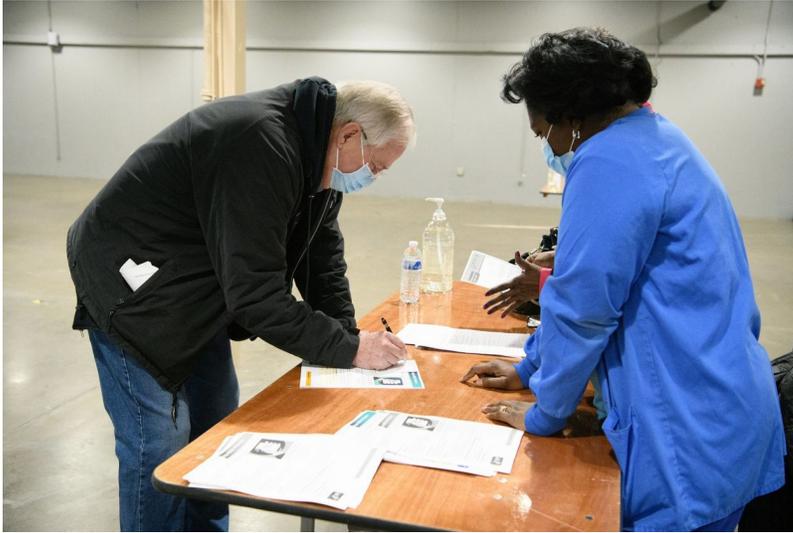
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Those getting ready to roll up their sleeves for a Covid-19 vaccine shot will take part in the most ambitious vaccination effort in U.S. history. As efforts ramp up, here's advice from doctors involved with the vaccine rollout on how to prepare and what to expect.

What's involved in getting the first dose?

Many people will register for a timed appointment, aimed at keeping wait times and the potential for crowds to a minimum—although the patchwork rollout so far has also meant many waiting in long lines. After filling out consent forms and receiving the shot, you'll be monitored for adverse reactions for 15 or 30 minutes depending on your allergy history. In

the case of a timed appointment, the entire process should take around an hour, says Julie Boom, co-chair of the Covid-19 Vaccine Task Force at Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston, which is now vaccinating eligible patients that already have records within the hospital system. Afterward, some people choose to go home and rest.



Registration is usually the first step on arrival for a Covid-19 vaccination.

PHOTO: AVI ADELMAN/ZUMA PRESS

What should you bring with you to the vaccine site?

In most cases, you’ll simply need your photo ID and proof of your appointment. Some places may require additional documents, such as employee badges for first responders to show they are eligible. Those getting vaccinated generally shouldn’t be asked to pay, so do ask questions if payment is requested.

Should you consider differences between the Pfizer -BioNTech and Moderna vaccines?

For now, the two vaccines available in the U.S. are found to be similarly safe and effective, says Wafaa El-Sadr, professor of epidemiology and medicine at Columbia University in New York. Eventually, choosing one vaccine over the other may come down to scheduling conflicts, she says. The second dose of the Pfizer vaccine is offered 21 days later, while Moderna is offered 28 days later. “The only thing I would consider is convenience,” says Dr. El-Sadr.

Do you need to fast or avoid any certain food or drinks before the vaccination?

No food precautions are required. Staying well hydrated prior to the vaccine is encouraged for people who tend to feel lightheaded with vaccines or blood draws, says Gregory Huhn, vaccination coordinator for Cook County Health, a hospital system in Chicago.

Before the vaccination, should you take a fever-reducing drug?

Even if you are worried about side effects, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention doesn't recommend taking fever-reducing drugs (known as antipyretics) before a vaccine shot. However antipyretics, such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen, can be used following vaccination to treat any fever or local discomfort, the CDC says.

Is there a risk of being exposed to the coronavirus while waiting for the vaccine?

In any public setting, there's a possibility of being exposed to the virus. The vaccine dose received that day won't offer additional protection, Dr. Huhn says. However, vaccine-site organizers are aware of the risks and take precautions throughout the process, which includes floor decals and furniture spaced at least six feet apart, along with strict masking and capacity limits, he says.



After being vaccinated, people wait 15 minutes in case of any adverse reaction, as recommended by the CDC.

PHOTO: DENISE CATHEY/THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD/ASSOCIATED PRESS

What happens after you get the shot?

People are asked to stay at the site to be monitored for adverse effects, including allergic reactions, though these are rare. Those experiencing any post-vaccine sensations can call

over a medical professional to address concerns. The monitoring occurs “within the line of sight of our nurses,” Dr. Huhn says. In some cases, Dr. Boom notes, feelings of faintness can relate to nervousness over getting the shot rather than side effects relating directly to the vaccine.

While those vaccinated are asked to stay between 15 and 30 minutes, it is possible to have an allergic reaction or worrying side effects after returning home, Dr. Huhn notes.

“Anaphylaxis can occur hours after exposure,” he says. If that happens, immediately seek medical help.

Will you get a record of your vaccination?

Adults will receive a vaccination card that includes the lot number and name of the administered vaccine along with a reminder to get their second dose. Those going for their second dose will need to bring this card with them. Your vaccination data is also recorded by the vaccine provider and stored electronically, Dr. Boom says. Later, you may need your vaccine document for work or travel purposes.

Do some people experience more side effects?

While many experience no side effects at all, some younger people with more robust immune systems often have a stronger immune response to the vaccine, which can take the form of side effects including fatigue, muscle aches and soreness at the injection site. In previous research, “those over age 55 had less reactogenicity, because their immune systems aren’t as vigorous as those of younger individuals,” Dr. Huhn says. Those who have previously had Covid may also have a stronger immune response, he adds.

How protected am I after the first shot alone?

Doctors say there is likely some protection from the first shot but, as the majority of participants in the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine trials received two doses, there isn’t yet enough data to say definitively how much protection and how long it lasts.

What is the purpose of the second shot?

The second dose enables the immune system to provide long-lasting protection. Doctors strongly advise getting both shots, in the recommended time frame.

How long does it take for the full vaccine protection to kick in?

It takes time for your body to build protection after any vaccination, the CDC says, and the vaccines that require two shots may not protect you until a week or two after your second shot. “The protective effect begins to be observed from two weeks after the second vaccine injection,” Dr. El-Sadr says. She notes that the minimum follow-up for vaccine study participants was eight weeks and that information will evolve over time on the duration of protection.

Is it necessary to wear a mask and social distance after completing the vaccination?

Precautions including mask-wearing and staying away from others are important even after you’ve been fully vaccinated, as the vaccines aren’t 100% effective, Dr. El-Sadr says. Late-stage trials showed Pfizer has 95% effectiveness while Moderna has 94.1%. Additionally, it is possible that even those who have been vaccinated can carry the virus without showing symptoms and pass it onto others. Research on this is still under way.

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Have you received the Covid-19 vaccine? If so, share your story about how you got it and what the experience was like.

Name*

Age *

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Corrections & Amplifications

Registration is usually the first step on arrival for a Covid-19 vaccination. A photo caption in an earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to a Covid-15 vaccination.

(Corrected on Jan. 19, 2021)

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