



COVID-19 vaccination questions and answers

A resource for tāngata whai i te ora, tāngata mātau ā-wheako and their whānau as well as people working in mental health and addiction services.

This resource outlines questions and answers people with experience of mental health and addiction challenges have about COVID-19 vaccination. It is informed by a survey carried out by Changing Minds, and a knowledge exchange webinar in July 2021 hosted by Dr Edwin Reynolds from the Immunisation Advisory Centre, with support from [Whāriki](#) and Equally Well champions. We also thank them for their input into this FAQ resource.

Key questions or concerns identified are outlined below in the following sections:

1. How the vaccine was developed, how it works, and side effects.
2. Contraindications/how the vaccine may interact with other things I'm taking.
3. Getting a vaccine or a COVID-19 test and priority groups.
4. The lived experience workforce.
5. Addressing misinformation, overcoming fear and engendering trust.

Mā te rongo, ka mōhio; Mā te mōhio; ka mārama; Mā te mārama, ka mātau, Mā te mātau ka ora.

This resource was last updated in August 2021.

1. How the vaccine was developed, how it works, and side effects

- We are very lucky in Aotearoa New Zealand to be rolling out the mRNA COVID-19 vaccine, known by most of us as the Pfizer vaccine or Comirnaty™. Studies so far show this vaccine is highly effective against COVID-19 (94%), it has few side-effects, and there are no safety concerns about giving it to people taking other medications as well as during pregnancy.
- Since the start of 2020, COVID-19 is the third leading cause of death globally.* It is vitally important we recognise the severity of the virus and ensure the people who are most vulnerable are protected.
- As people with experience of mental health and addiction challenges, our physical health and indeed our lifespan is already impacted negatively. If we contract COVID-19, we are at risk of getting very sick. The vaccination is the best way to protect ourselves and our whānau from COVID-19.
- You have a choice in whether to get the vaccination or not. It is important you and your whānau have all the information** and support you need to decide.

How was the vaccine tested and approved so quickly?

- Science has come a long way since the early days of vaccine development and there have been real breakthroughs in design - particularly with the newer mRNA and vector-based vaccines which are leading the way. The technology behind the COVID-19 vaccine has been in development for decades. This meant that when the need for a COVID-19 vaccine arose, some of the work was already done and it could be quickly progressed and tested in people.
- A lot of funding has been put towards making the vaccine, from all over the world, and researchers worked together and shared data to progress it. This allowed the research to progress rapidly by overcoming roadblocks that usually slow progress down.
- No shortcuts were taken in the process and all steps usually involved in testing the safety and effectiveness of a vaccine were followed.
- Medsafe carefully reviewed the vaccine data before making the decision to approve the use of this vaccine in New Zealand. Medsafe continues to monitor national and international evidence about the safety and effectiveness of this vaccine.

*<https://www.aarp.org/health/conditions-treatments/info-2021/covid-death-rate.html>

**The Ministry of Health has developed some easy read resources to help whānau understand the vaccination process: [Before getting a vaccine](#); [After getting a vaccine](#)

What are the potential side effects and how long do side effects last?

- Most people experience no or mild side effects. The most commonly known side effects include pain in the arm where the vaccine was given, headache, feeling feverish, fluey, and nausea. These usually last for a day or two after vaccination.
- The side effects are caused by your immune system preparing to protect you from future infection.
- Serious reactions such as allergic reactions are very rare.

Why are the side effects worse after the second vaccine?

- You may experience worse side effects after your second dose because your body produces a stronger immune response. However, not everyone will experience worse side effects after their second dose.
- Having both doses means you and your whānau will be much better protected from getting sick if you do catch COVID-19, as your immune system will be better prepared to fight it off.

Are there any long-term side effects?

- Over four billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been given worldwide in over 190 countries. The Pfizer vaccine is being used in over 110 countries with over 300 million doses given. Evidence so far indicates long-term side effects from the Pfizer vaccine are extremely rare.
- If you are worried about possible long-term effects, speak with a health professional you trust.

What additives and possible allergens are added to the vaccine?

- The Pfizer vaccine contains very few additives that could be associated with allergy. Only one potential allergen has been proposed so far - polyethylene glycol (PEG) - which is used in a range of medicines and cosmetics.
- The active ingredient in the vaccine is called messenger RNA or mRNA. It is naturally found in our cells and carries instructions for the 'spike' protein on the COVID-19 virus. This helps our body learn to recognise the virus in future. The mRNA is protected by a fat/lipid bubble that is stabilised by PEG.
- The vaccine contains a salt solution (buffer) so it matches the fluids in our bodies. It also contains a tiny amount of sucrose (sugar) to help store the vaccine at very cold temperatures. There are no preservatives or immune stimulants (adjuvants).
- No animal products are used in the vaccine, especially no mRNA from mammals. It is suitable for vegans.

2. Does the vaccine interact with other things I am taking

Are there any interactions with other medications or substances?

Such as antipsychotic, alcohol and other drugs, opioid substitution medications, diabetes or blood pressure medications, immune-suppressant medications and cancer treatments?

- There are no known interactions between the COVID-19 Pfizer vaccine and psychotropic medications or other substances.
- Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you are unsure. No medications prevent you from having a COVID-19 vaccination, but the timing of vaccine can be discussed with your doctor to ensure you have the best possible immune response.
- If you are taking immunosuppressant medication or undergoing cancer treatment, it is best to discuss the ideal time to get your COVID-19 vaccine with your doctor, before booking it in.

Is it safe to have the vaccine with other coexisting physical health conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure?

- Yes – it is highly recommended people with these health conditions be vaccinated as they increase the risk of experiencing severe COVID-19 and hospitalisation.

3. Getting the vaccine or a COVID-19 test and priority groups

When can people with mental health and addiction challenges receive the vaccine?

- Tāngata whai i te ora, or people using mental health and addiction services, are included in group 3 for vaccination (group 3 are those most vulnerable to severe outcomes if exposed to COVID-19). This is great news for our hapori or communities as it means our physical health is being prioritised. See <https://covid19.govt.nz/covid-19-vaccines/our-covid-19-vaccination-plan/covid-19-vaccine-rollout-groups/> for who is in each group and when you should expect to be contacted.
- The importance of vaccinating people with experience of mental health and addiction issues early is highlighted in a [New Zealand Medical Journal](#) article given the increased risk of hospitalisation and death.

Where do youth under 16 and teachers in schools fit into the priority groups?

- Research tells us that under 16s seem less likely to pass on the virus if they contract it and the disease is much less severe. Aotearoa New Zealand will be watching the 12–15-year-old immunisation trials overseas closely. Teachers will be vaccinated in either group 3 or 4 depending on if they have underlying conditions.

How will I be contacted for vaccination?

- Where and when you are offered the vaccine will depend on where and who provides vaccinations in your area. You can check your local DHB website and/or caseworker if you have one. Groups 1, 2, 3 and people over 40 in group 4 are currently being vaccinated.
- Many people with a mental health and addiction challenge are in either priority group 2 or 3, so you should have received an invite to be vaccinated by now. If you haven't, contact your GP, local DHB or ask your mental health or addiction practitioner.

How do I book?

- You can now book online at <https://bookmyvaccine.covid19.health.nz/> or over the phone by calling 0800 28 29 26 between 8am and 8pm, 7-days a week. Interpreters are available if you ask.
- It would be helpful, but not necessary, to have your NHI number available when you book. You can find this on a prescription, x-ray or letter from the hospital.

Where do I go to get vaccinated?

- There are special vaccination centres set up with people specially trained to give the vaccine and monitor you for 20 minutes afterwards to make sure you're okay. Depending on where you live, these centres could be in marae, churches, large workplaces, medical centres, pop-up centres, large event centres or pharmacies.

Will sites be accessible for people with disabilities?

- It is best to call (or ask your caseworker or a whānau member to call) the place where you will be getting a vaccine to ensure it will be accessible for you.

Can I bring a support person?

- Yes, you can bring a support person with you when you receive your vaccine, though this might depend on the alert level at the time due to physical distancing requirements.

Will or can I be vaccinated by someone I know and trust?

- Your vaccinator needs to be an authorised vaccinator. We suggest you bring a support person with you if you are feeling anxious or worried. There may be an opportunity for you to attend your local GP clinic to be vaccinated or a community space where you feel comfortable such as a church or marae.

How do I get another vaccination card if I lose mine?

- The COVID Immunisation Register (CIR) will have your COVID-19 vaccination details, including if you have chosen not to have it when offered. Information about your health belongs to you. If you lose your vaccination record/card, you can request another copy.

Can I shower after the vaccination?

- Yes, you can shower after your vaccine. Just keep in mind some people may experience a sore arm which might make this a little uncomfortable.

How do I manage having both the covid and flu vaccine?

- It is recommended to leave a gap of at least two weeks between your COVID-19 vaccine and your flu vaccine.
- If you are already booked in for a COVID-19 vaccine then have that first. If not, you can choose to get your flu vaccine first.

Will there be a need for a yearly vaccine like with the flu?

- It is not yet known for how long the vaccine will protect us for. A lot of factors are involved in determining this. So far, it looks like we will be protected for at least a year or longer. There are discussions around offering booster shots, particularly to people who may not respond so well to the first doses of the vaccine. One concern is that if the virus changes significantly, it may be able to get around our ability to stop it from infecting us even if we have been vaccinated. In this case, the vaccine might need to be adjusted to match (like the flu vaccine).

Why can't we have the saliva test for COVID-19? The nasal swab is invasive.

- Aotearoa New Zealand is exploring saliva testing options for the general population. However, there are some barriers that make it less effective than nasal swabs. For example, the need to ensure people have refrained from eating or smoking for a set period of time before getting tested.

4. The lived experience workforce

What can I say to people who are waiting for vaccination but have not been contacted?

- If you are concerned that they are in a group that should have been contacted already, support them to get in touch with their DHB to find out more, for a list of DHBs and contact details go here - <https://www.health.govt.nz/new-zealand-health-system/my-dhb>

What are some of the obstacles to rolling out vaccinations to tāngata whai ora and what are the solutions?

- As tāngata whai i te ora, we may have had negative experiences with health services that make us fearful and/or distrustful. It is important people feel safe and fully informed of the risks and benefits of vaccination.
- It is important to address people's concerns without judgement and hold them in confidence. People should be given information to help them make an informed choice.
- It is important to us that we are not forced or coerced to have the vaccination, but supported to know the risks if we don't. We feel safer by being able to have people we trust around us before, during and after vaccination, if that's what we choose.
- Some of our tāngata whai ora are difficult to reach, we may be unwell, sleeping rough or incarcerated. It is important that our health is prioritised and that people are advocating for and with us. We could become extremely sick if we were to get COVID-19 so and vaccination needs to be offered in places we can get to, and with people we trust.

How do I become a vaccinator?

- Depending on whether you are a current health professional, and your experience, there are different courses and requirements to join the team. To find your pathway visit <https://covid.immune.org.nz/workforce/joining-workforce-available-education-profession>

How can I support someone else who doesn't want to have the vaccine while acknowledging they are at higher risk?

- Support them to find reputable sources of information like this brochure and the websites above that may help to dispel their fears.

Are there known effective messages to help ambivalent people decide?

- The Immunisation Advisory Centre website has a large amount of information around the safety and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine. Visit <https://covid.immune.org.nz/>
- The messages within this brochure we hope will help people who have concerns, answer those concerns and feel confident to seek information and support.

5. Addressing misinformation, overcoming fear and creating trust

How can I identify vaccination misinformation?

- We know there is a lot of conflicting information out there from social media to letterbox leaflets. If the information is not linked directly to information on reputable websites like covid19.govt.nz, the Ministry of Health website or the Immunisation Advisory Centre we advise you to be cautious, even sceptical.
- The COVID 19 website gives great, practical information on how to respond to or report false information when you come across it: <https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/resources/Vaccine-resources/Guidance-on-responding-to-false-information.pdf>

Is vaccination part of a scheme to implant devices in people with mental health issues?

- Absolutely not. The only thing going into your arm is the vaccine. This is not a piece of the virus itself, but a simple instruction or message for our cells to make a (spike) protein from the virus that will trigger an immune response.

Will there be a national database of who has received and who has declined vaccination?

- There is a COVID Immunisation Register (CIR) database that registers when you get vaccinated. This records if you choose not to be vaccinated as well.

If I am under the Mental Health Act do I have to have the vaccine?

- No. Although the vaccine is not mandatory in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is the best way to protect you and your whānau from COVID-19.

If you have further questions or need more information there are a range of resources available from trusted websites like the [COVID-19 government website](https://covid19.govt.nz), [Ministry of Health](https://www.health.govt.nz), and the [Immunisation Advisory Centre](https://www.immunisation.govt.nz). Resources specific for Māori, Pasifika and disabled peoples are available from <https://covid19.govt.nz/iwi-and-communities/>. You can also ask a health professional you trust.