

Frequently asked questions

ABOUT THE VACCINE

HOW DO THE COVID-19 VACCINES WORK?

The COVID-19 vaccines work by preparing the body to defend itself against COVID-19.

When a person is given the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, some of their cells will read the vaccine's mRNA instructions and temporarily produce the spike protein, which mimics the COVID-19 virus. The person's immune system will then recognise this protein as foreign and produce antibodies and activate T cells (white blood cells) to attack it.

When a person is given the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, some of their cells will be "infected" by a dead adenovirus (common cold) carrying the DNA for the spike protein, which mimics the COVID-19 virus. The person's immune system will then recognise this protein as foreign and produce antibodies and activate T cells (white blood cells) to attack it.

Once vaccinated, if a person comes into contact with COVID-19, their immune system will recognise it and be ready to defend the body against it having already been exposed to the vaccine.

WHAT'S IN THE COVID-19 VACCINES?

Vaccine ingredients vary depending on what the vaccine is for. Generally, vaccines may contain some of the following ingredients:

- > a protein component of a virus
- > a piece of genetic code (DNA or mRNA)
- > a very small dose of a weakened virus
- > a substance to boost the immune response (an adjuvant)
- > a small amount of preservative
- > sterile salt water (saline) for injections

Ingredients for the COVID-19 vaccines approved for use in Australia will be listed in the [Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods](#).

DO THE VACCINES CONTAIN ANY ANIMAL PRODUCTS?

The approved COVID-19 vaccines do not contain any animal products or egg.

CAN THE VACCINE GIVE ME COVID-19?

No, the vaccines available do not use the live or whole virus that causes COVID-19.

IF I CATCH COVID-19 AFTER I HAVE THE VACCINE, CAN I PASS THE INFECTION ONTO OTHERS?

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) will continue to monitor the ongoing research to understand whether the vaccines can stop a person passing the virus onto another person. This is why it's important that even if you have been vaccinated, you should continue practising good hygiene, physical distancing, and staying home if you are unwell.

DO I STILL NEED TO PRACTICE HAND HYGIENE AND PHYSICAL DISTANCING EVEN IF I'VE BEEN VACCINATED?

It is very important that we continue practising good hygiene, physical distancing, and staying home if you are unwell, especially during the roll out of the vaccine program, which will take several months.

Australia will still need to have the flexible strategies already in place to control COVID-19. If the vaccine program is effective and results in a high proportion of people being vaccinated, it is hoped that we will be able to reduce some of these control measures. This is likely to be a slow process and will rely on many people being willing to have the vaccine.

HOW LONG DOES THE VACCINE PROTECT ME FROM GETTING COVID-19?

Clinical trials have shown that the Pfizer/BioNTech, AstraZeneca and Novavax vaccines protect against COVID-19 symptoms and severe disease after a person receives two doses. At this stage, there is not enough information to understand the long term protection against COVID-19 after vaccination. Booster doses may be required, similar to other vaccinations, such as the flu vaccine.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) will continue to monitor the ongoing research to understand how the vaccines work over time. This is why it's important that even if you have been vaccinated, you should continue practising good hygiene, physical distancing, and staying home if you are unwell.

ARE THERE ANY SIDE EFFECTS?

Vaccines, like any other medication or natural therapy, can have side effects. As part of regulatory assessment of all vaccines, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) considers information about possible side effects. For a vaccine to be registered for use in Australia, the benefits must outweigh the risks.

You may experience minor side effects following vaccination. Most side effects last no more than a couple of days and do not require special treatment. Serious reactions like allergic reactions are extremely rare.

Vaccines are monitored for a long time and even after a vaccine is given, it is still monitored for safety. Healthcare professionals contribute to ongoing monitoring by informing the TGA of any side effects, even if they are very minor. This means the TGA can oversee the safety of a vaccine across the country and, in the unlikely event that there is a safety risk, inform healthcare providers, the community and the Government as soon as possible.

Common reactions to the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine include:

- > pain and swelling at the injection site
- > tiredness
- > headache
- > muscle and joint pain
- > chills
- > fever.

Some people may also experience redness at the injection site, nausea, itching at the injection site, pain in the limb, enlarged lymph nodes, difficulty sleeping or feel unwell.

Common reactions to the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine include:

- > tenderness, pain and swelling at the injection site
- > tiredness
- > headache
- > muscle and joint pain
- > chills
- > fever.

Some people may also experience swelling or redness at the injection site, nausea, or generally feel unwell.

DO THE COVID-19 VACCINES WORK ON NEW VARIANTS?

It is anticipated that both the Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccines will be effective against the newer strains of COVID-19.

This is because the vaccines work by inducing what is known as a "polyclonal" response – a collection of immunological responses to many different parts of the COVID-19 "spike" protein. In the new variants, only a limited part of the spike protein is changed, and much is unchanged, so the vaccines should still work against the main, unchanged parts to the COVID-19 spike protein.

The Australian Government will continue to closely monitor developments and do their own genetic examination of any local cases.

HOW ARE THE VACCINES GOING TO BE TRANSPORTED TO SOUTH AUSTRALIA?

The Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine needs to be stored at minus 70 degrees centigrade. The Australian Government is working closely with SA Health to develop a process for transporting the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine.

Vaccine batches must be:

- > dispatched from the manufacturer
- > received at our borders and checked by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA)
- > allocated and distributed to vaccination sites
- > received by health care professionals to administer.

In anticipation of this, SA Health is preparing to administer vaccines by:

- > preparing safe and secure cold chain storage
- > training the workforce who will administer the vaccines
- > organising and checking equipment
- > activating systems for ongoing monitoring.

Information regarding transportation and storage of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine will be released shortly. The AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine can be manufactured in Australia and stored at normal refrigerated temperatures, and therefore the logistics of transporting and storing this vaccine are simpler.

SAFETY, TESTING AND TRIALS

HOW IS A VACCINE APPROVED FOR USE IN AUSTRALIA?

The COVID-19 vaccines being used in Australia have been approved by the Australian Government's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and administered under the advice of the [COVID-19 Vaccine and Treatments for Australia – Science and Industry Technical Advisory Group](#) and the [Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation \(ATAGI\)](#).

Before any vaccine is registered for use, it is tested extensively during development and then in thousands of people. Testing begins with laboratory research, then animal studies and finally human clinical trials. Clinical trials involve testing the vaccine in volunteers, and are conducted in phases.

Before any vaccine is approved for use in Australia, including a COVID-19 vaccine, it must pass the TGA's rigorous assessment and approval processes. This includes assessment of its safety, quality and effectiveness.

The TGA is actively monitoring COVID-19 vaccine development both in Australia and around the world, and is also part of a network of international regulators that meet regularly to discuss the development of COVID-19 vaccines.

The TGA is engaging early with vaccine developers, undertaking a thorough and efficient review of vaccine candidates and discussing the application process. Early engagement will not affect the comprehensive review process that clinical trial results are subject to in Australia.

ARE THE COVID-19 VACCINES SAFE?

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) have provisionally approved the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for people 16 years and older and the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine for people 18 years and older. This approval means that the vaccines has met the extremely high safety standards set by the TGA.

The TGA will approve all COVID-19 vaccines being used in Australia to ensure that safety standards are met. The vaccines available do not use the live or whole virus that causes COVID-19.

HOW WERE THE COVID-19 VACCINES DEVELOPED AND APPROVED IN A SHORT TIMEFRAME?

All available resources and efforts have been directed towards finding an effective vaccine, due to the urgency of protecting people from the COVID-19 virus.

Some of the reasons behind this rapid progress include:

- > Unprecedented levels of funding and collaboration between vaccine developers and governments around the world. Planning has been undertaken early, such as investing in manufacturing facilities before a vaccine is even available.
- > Technology has evolved to make vaccine development faster than in the past. To develop a vaccine, scientists need to understand the virus's genetic code. New technology has allowed researchers to quickly identify the genetic code of the COVID-19 virus, soon after the virus emerged. This allowed scientists around the world to start work in designing and building vaccines.
- > Clinical trials progress more quickly if a disease is widespread, which is the case for COVID-19. This means researchers can evaluate the effect of a vaccine between the unvaccinated and vaccinated groups much sooner than for a rare disease.

WHY WERE THE COVID-19 VACCINES AVAILABLE EARLIER OVERSEAS?

Some countries have used emergency use authorisation to roll the COVID-19 vaccine out more quickly. Emergency use authorisation is not a full approval of a vaccine. In countries facing significant COVID-19 outbreaks, the benefits of rolling out a vaccine before full regulatory assessment may outweigh the risk of waiting for a full analysis.

Due to the proactive management of COVID-19 in Australia, we have been able to wait for the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) to make an assessment through the provisional registration pathway. This allows the TGA to undertake its comprehensive regulatory assessment of the safety and effectiveness of vaccine candidates.

WHAT WAS INVOLVED IN COVID-19 VACCINE TRIALS?

Before any vaccine is registered for use, it is tested extensively during development and then in thousands of people. Testing begins with laboratory research, then animal studies and finally human clinical trials. Clinical trials involve testing the vaccine in volunteers, and are conducted in phases.

Clinical trials must provide scientific evidence which demonstrates that the benefits of a vaccine greatly outweigh any risks.

There are different types of clinical trials:

- > Phase 1 clinical trials usually include a few dozen healthy adult volunteers. They focus primarily on establishing that the vaccine is safe, and on demonstrating that the vaccine induces an immune response.
- > Phase 2 clinical trials have hundreds of volunteers, and can include specific groups the vaccine is intended for. These trials aim to test whether the vaccine causes an immune response and confirm that it is safe with minor side effects, such as a mild headache.
- > Phase 3 clinical trials include many thousands of participants. They aim to test whether a vaccine is effective in preventing people from getting the disease – in this case COVID-19. Phase 3 trials also thoroughly assess the vaccine for safety and side effects. Researchers usually compare data between vaccinated people and those who received a placebo. They compare the frequency of infection, disease severity and any reported side effects between the two groups.

For COVID-19 vaccines, some of these phases have been combined. For example, in Phase 1 and 2 trials, results are analysed after the first few dozen volunteers are studied. The trial then proceeds in hundreds more people. Some Phase 3 studies have started once preliminary data from Phase 1 and 2 trials are available. Having these 'overlapping' timeframes has helped develop COVID-19 vaccines quickly, to make them available earlier to save lives.

DOES PRIORITY ACCESS TO THE VACCINE ALSO MEAN THAT IT IS BEING TRIALLED ON ME?

No. The vaccines have been through clinical trials and have been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for use in Australia through a rigorous assessment and approval processes. This includes assessment of their safety, quality and effectiveness.

GETTING VACCINATED FOR COVID-19

WHY SHOULD I GET VACCINATED?

We strongly encourage you to get vaccinated as COVID-19 can cause serious ongoing health conditions, and sometimes death. Vaccination is a safe and effective way of protecting you and your family.

WHY DOES EVERYONE NEED TO GET VACCINATED?

The COVID-19 vaccinations reduce the community's risk of COVID-19 outbreaks and will help to reduce symptoms and side-effects of COVID-19 if you are exposed.

Once you are vaccinated, you may still be able to catch or spread the virus, therefore everyone needs to get vaccinated and you cannot rely on others getting vaccinated to protect yourself.

WHEN WILL THE COVID-19 VACCINE BE AVAILABLE?

The Australian Government is coordinating a staged rollout of the vaccine, which is expected to commence from late February 2021.

ARE COVID-19 VACCINES FREE?

The first and second doses of the COVID-19 vaccines will be free for all people living in Australia.

IS RECEIVING A COVID-19 VACCINE VOLUNTARY?

Receiving the COVID-19 vaccine is completely voluntary, however, it is strongly encouraged.

WHICH COVID-19 VACCINES ARE AVAILABLE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA?

The Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine will be used initially during the Phase 1a rollout. This vaccine has met the rigorous safety standards of the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). This vaccine requires two doses, 21 days apart. Detailed information can be found on the [TGA website](#).

The AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine has also met the rigorous safety standards of the TGA. This vaccine requires two doses, with the second dose recommended to be administered 12 weeks after the first. Detailed information can be found on the [TGA website](#).

The Australian Government has secured doses of other COVID-19 vaccines, including those produced Novavax, which are still subject to TGA approvals and The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) advice. More information can be found on the [Department of Health website](#).

DO I GET TO CHOOSE WHAT TYPE OF VACCINE I GET?

You will receive the vaccine available at the time and location of your appointment. The vaccine you receive may also be determined by your health, age or occupation (if your occupation puts you at a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19).

HOW WILL I KNOW WHEN IT'S MY TURN TO GET VACCINATED?

Information will be provided to priority groups and the wider South Australian community when the vaccine becomes available to each group.

WHERE CAN I GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA?

There will be both metropolitan and regional hubs set up across South Australia to ensure priority groups can access the vaccine at the allocated time. Further information regarding locations of these sites and any additional sites will be provided as soon as possible.

WHO WILL BE ADMINISTERING MY VACCINE? HAVE THEY HAD TRAINING?

Depending on which phase of the roll out you're in, you could get your COVID-19 vaccine from a doctor, nurse, pharmacist or other health care worker.

The person vaccinating you will have completed COVID-19 vaccination training. This will ensure they can safely manage and administer COVID-19 vaccines.

The training is available now for all authorised COVID-19 vaccination providers.

This will include:

- > health professionals in hospitals
- > general practices
- > state and Commonwealth vaccination clinics
- > Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations
- > pharmacies.

WHAT IS THE TIMING BETWEEN THE TWO VACCINATIONS?

The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine requires two doses, 21 days apart.

The AstraZeneca vaccine requires two doses, the second dose recommended to be administered 12 weeks after the first.

CAN I GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE AND THE FLU VACCINE AT THE SAME TIME?

The recommended minimum interval between a dose of seasonal flu vaccine and a dose of either of the currently approved COVID-19 vaccines (Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca) is 14 days either side of the flu vaccine.

Speak to your GP for more information.

CAN I BRING SOMEONE TO MY VACCINATION APPOINTMENT WITH ME?

You can have someone attend your vaccination appointment for support. This can be a support worker, family member, carer or friend.

IF CONSENT IS GIVEN IN ADVANCE, CAN IT BE WITHDRAWN ON THE DAY OF THE VACCINE?

Yes, receiving the COVID-19 vaccine is completely voluntary and consent can be withdrawn at any time prior to receiving the first or second dose of the vaccine.

WHAT IF I FEEL UNWELL AFTER MY VACCINE?

The Australian Immunisation Handbook, developed by The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI), provides clinical guidelines for healthcare professionals and others about using vaccines safely and effectively.

The Handbook recommends that:

- > all vaccine recipients be observed for at least 15 minutes after they have been vaccinated, to ensure that they do not experience an immediate adverse event, and to provide rapid medical care if needed.
- > people with a history of anaphylaxis to non-vaccine antigens (e.g. food, insect stings, medicines) should be observed for 30 minutes following administration of a COVID-19 vaccine dose.

WILL I GET A RECORD OF MY VACCINATION?

If you receive your COVID-19 vaccination in South Australia, you will be given an official hard copy record of your vaccination. Your vaccination information will be recorded on the Australian Immunisation Register.

Australians can access their immunisation history statement through Medicare for proof of vaccination, both digitally and in hard copy, if required.

WHO SHOULD GET THE VACCINE

WHO WILL GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

The COVID-19 vaccine is being rolled out in phases across South Australia to ensure priority groups can access the vaccine.

The phases are as follows:

Phase 1a

- > Frontline at-risk health care workers including staff in GP respiratory clinics and COVID-19 testing facilities, ambulance staff, paramedics, ICU and emergency department staff and clinical and ancillary support staff (staff includes employees, volunteers, students and contractors)
- > Residential aged care and disability care staff
- > Residential aged care and disability care residents
- > Quarantine and airport workers

Phase 1b

- > Adults over 70 years
- > All other health care workers
- > Begin to vaccinate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- > Younger adults with an underlying medical condition, including those with a disability
- > Critical and high risk workers including defence, police, fire, emergency services and meat processing

Phase 2a

- > Adults over 50 years
- > Continue vaccinating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- > Other critical and high risk workers.

Phase 2b

- > Balance of adult population
- > Catch up any unvaccinated Australians from previous phases.

Phase 3

- > Consideration of people under 16 years, based on further Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) approvals and the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) advice.

I WORK IN A HIGH RISK AREA (PRIORITY 1A) BUT DON'T WANT TO GET THE VACCINE, WILL THIS AFFECT MY JOB?

It's important that people working in high risk areas are given access to the vaccine as early as possible, which is why you've been included in Phase 1a of the national roll out.

Your occupational risk of exposure to COVID-19 should be considered when discussing your role and responsibility with your employer. Individual employers may consider company policies regarding the COVID-19 vaccine that consider occupational health and safety risks.

The vaccine is not mandated by the Australian or State Governments.

IS THE VACCINE SAFE FOR OLDER PEOPLE?

The [Therapeutic Goods Administration \(TGA\) has concluded](#) that there is no specific risk associated with the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in older people.

Data for the use in people over 85 years old is limited. The potential benefits of vaccination versus the potential risk in the frail elderly should be carefully assessed on a case by case basis.

Patients and/or their families, representatives and carers can talk to their GP or a health professional about the COVID-19 vaccines.

For the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, the [TGA has concluded](#) that there are no safety concerns for people over the age of 65 in the clinical studies, nor in the large numbers of elderly people who have been vaccinated to date in overseas rollouts. The decision to use the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine in a patient over the age of 65 should be decided on a case by case basis with consideration of age, co-morbidities and their environment, taking into account the benefits of vaccination and potential risks.

CAN I GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE IF I AM PREGNANT OR BREASTFEEDING?

Clinical trials for new medicines do not typically include pregnant or breastfeeding participants.

If you are planning a pregnancy, you can receive the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine. You do not need to avoid becoming pregnant before or after vaccination. You are not required to have a pregnancy test before getting vaccinated.

If you are breastfeeding, you can receive the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at any time. You do not need to stop breastfeeding before or after vaccination.

We do not routinely recommend COVID-19 vaccine in pregnancy. You and your health professional can consider it if the potential benefits of vaccination outweigh any potential risks.

Each country hosting clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccine candidates has different guidance regarding use of COVID-19 vaccines in pregnancy based on the benefits, risks and uncertainties in the context of the prevailing pandemic situation.

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) will soon release advice about the use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine in women who are pregnant, trying to get pregnant and/or breastfeeding.

I AM IMMUNOCOMPROMISED. SHOULD I HAVE THE VACCINE?

Immunocompromised people are being prioritised to receive a COVID-19 vaccine in Phase 1b of the roll out, as they are at increased risk of severe outcomes with COVID-19.

None of the COVID-19 vaccines that have been approved, or are currently being considered for approval, in Australia contain the live COVID-19 virus, which means they are safe for immunocompromised people.

Immunocompromised people should follow the advice from their doctor regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, including considering when to get the vaccine amongst any other treatments or medications.

WILL OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS OF IMMUNE-COMPROMISED CHILDREN BE INCLUDED IN A PRIORITY GROUP?

In the first phase of the roll out, only those people who have been listed in the priority groups will receive the vaccine. The vaccine will be available to other people in later stages of the roll out.

CAN CHILDREN GET THE VACCINE?

Clinical trials for new medicines do not typically include children as participants. Further clinical trials for other COVID-19 vaccines will include children.

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) will continue to provide advice in relation to children.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) have currently approved the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for use in individuals aged 16 years and over, and the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine for use in individuals aged 18 years and over.

I'VE ALREADY HAD COVID-19. DO I NEED TO GET VACCINATED?

You should be vaccinated regardless of whether you already had COVID-19 infection, due to the severe health risks and as reinfection with COVID-19 is possible. Experts do not yet know how long someone is protected from getting sick again after recovering from COVID-19. The natural immunity developed by people who have had COVID-19 varies.

As long as you are feeling well, and no longer have confirmed infection it is recommended to still receive COVID-19 vaccines.

There is no known disadvantage to having the COVID-19 vaccine when previously exposed or infected with COVID-19.

MORE INFORMATION

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

For information about the use of the COVID-19 vaccine in South Australia, visit www.covidvaccine.sa.gov.au.

For more information about the COVID-19 vaccines, visit the [Australian Government Department of Health](#) website, which also has a range of [translated information](#).

The National Coronavirus Helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on 1800 020 080.

For more information

National Coronavirus Helpline 1800 020 080
covidvaccine.sa.gov.au

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COVID-19
VACCINATION
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