



# COVID-19 vaccine rollout to residential aged care workers

## Common questions

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The information below is designed to help residential aged care managers and infection prevention and control leads to discuss common questions about the COVID-19 vaccine rollout with their co-workers and address any concerns they may have.

### Can allied health staff, or nursing agency staff, who work across a number of residential aged care facilities get access to a vaccine?

Aged care workers eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in Phase 1a include all people working at a residential aged care facility responsible for resident care, support and services for residents, maintenance and administration. This includes:

- nursing and personal care staff
- allied health professionals
- kitchen, cleaning, laundry, garden and office staff.

Staff working across multiple aged care facilities should aim to receive both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine at the one location.

Management staff in residential aged care facilities are also eligible under Phase 1a.

### Can I get the COVID-19 vaccine if I'm not an Australian resident or citizen?

Yes. The vaccines that the Australian Government is making available are safe and effective vaccines, and free to everyone living in Australia.

## **Do I have to pay for the COVID-19 vaccine?**

No, the COVID-19 vaccine is free for everyone in Australia. Vaccination providers cannot charge people for the COVID-19 vaccine or for appointments to receive the vaccine.

If a vaccination provider charges for any costs associated with the administration of the COVID-19 vaccination (including booking fees), contact the Department of Health.

If a person consults their GP for issues not about the COVID-19 vaccination, they will be charged the GP's normal fee for that.

## **Were COVID-19 vaccines developed too quickly to be safe?**

COVID-19 vaccines have been developed without compromising quality, safety and effectiveness.

It may appear they have been developed very quickly, but researchers around the world have been working hard to develop COVID-19 vaccines from the earliest stages of the pandemic.

They have been able to speed up development of vaccines thanks to the collaboration between them, scientists, manufacturers and distributors.

The development and implementation planning phases have been run side-by-side, instead of one after the other. This has been made possible because of unprecedented global funding.

In addition, research into how to respond to a pandemic has been occurring long before COVID-19.

This research looks at data from previous coronaviruses such as SARS in 2002 and MERS in 2012, giving researchers a head start when it comes to building the COVID-19 vaccines.

In Australia, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, or the TGA, has been rigorously assessing the potential COVID-19 vaccines for safety, quality and effectiveness. They will continue to do this with all vaccines before they will be approved and made available to Australians.

Once approved, each batch must also be checked to make sure it meets the same quality standards.

## **Does the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine cause blood clots?**

Australia's immunisation experts, the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) have reviewed the data available on the incidence of a rare blood clotting condition that has occurred after COVID-19 vaccination.

There has been a link established between the AstraZeneca vaccine and a very rare but serious side effect called thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS).

There is a very low chance of this side effect, which is estimated to occur in around 6 people in every million after being vaccinated with AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. This rate is lower than the natural background occurrence of a blood clotting.

As a result, ATAGI has recommended that the Pfizer vaccine is preferred for people under the age of 50.

If you are under the age of 50, you should discuss with your doctor, nurse or immunisation provider whether you can receive the AstraZeneca vaccine. Your doctor will weigh the potential risks against the benefits they expect the vaccine may have for you.

## **Will experts provide more information about blood clot cases?**

ATAGI is continuing to monitor data on the use of all COVID-19 vaccines, including the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine and Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine, that emerges globally and from the Australian program.

Information about reported side effects is regularly updated on the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) website.

## **Will I need to get a COVID-19 booster shot each year?**

It is not yet known how long the COVID-19 vaccine protection will last. Clinical trials are currently happening to find out if we will need booster doses on an annual or longer basis.

To be fully vaccinated in the initial vaccine rollout, a person must have two doses of the same vaccine, given at the appropriate dosing schedule.

## **Will the COVID-19 vaccine still be effective if my second dose is postponed?**

If you have missed the recommended timing interval for the COVID-19 vaccine, you should still get a second dose. A two-dose course is recommended for all individuals for optimal protection.

Talk to your vaccine provider or employer about how you can access your second dose.

## **If I'm over the age of 50 why is it safe for me to get the AstraZeneca vaccine?**

ATAGI has made the recommendation that people over the age of 50 are safe to continue to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine.

TTS (blood clots with low platelets) is more common in people under the age of 50. We also know that the risk of serious disease and death from COVID-19 increases very significantly as people become older.

That is why ATAGI is recommending that people over the age of 50 should still receive the COVID-19 vaccine from AstraZeneca.

## **If I'm under the age of 50 and have already received the first dose of AstraZeneca should I get the second dose?**

Yes. ATAGI have recommended that people who have received a first dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine and who have not experienced serious side effects from that first dose should feel confident to receive the second dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine.

This is based on the experience of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine rollout in other countries around the world, particularly in the UK and in Europe where millions of doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine have been used.

## **Can you have the AstraZeneca as a first dose then have Pfizer for your second dose?**

Current medical advice is you will need to have two doses of the same vaccine to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. There is not any information on the safety or efficacy of mixing different COVID-19 vaccine doses.

If you develop a severe reaction against the first COVID-19 vaccine dose (e.g. anaphylaxis or TTS) you may get a different COVID-19 vaccine brand to complete your two dose course.

## **Will I test positive for COVID-19 once I have received the vaccine?**

No. The standard test for COVID-19 is the polymerase chain reaction test or PCR test. This test detects whether there is any of the genetic material of the virus circulating in your body.

The AstraZeneca and Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines will not trigger that polymerase chain reaction test.

## **Should I avoid being vaccinated if I feel unwell?**

You shouldn't attend your COVID-19 vaccination appointment if you're unwell with fever, cough, a runny nose, or other symptoms that could be from COVID-19 or other respiratory viruses, or if you're awaiting COVID-19 test results.

If you've tested positive to COVID-19 and you're in isolation, or if you're a close contact or someone with COVID-19, don't attend your vaccine appointment. If you're in any of those categories remember to reschedule your appointment.

## **Should I still get tested for COVID-19 if I feel unwell after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine?**

The vaccines are designed to prevent serious illness and death. You cannot catch COVID-19 from the COVID-19 vaccine, but you can still catch COVID-19 after being vaccinated.

For the next day or two following your vaccination, you may feel a little bit feverish, tired, or achy as a side effect of the vaccine. If that happens, you do not need to get a COVID-19 test. If you have symptoms like that, and you also have COVID-19 symptoms such as a runny nose, a sore throat, or a cough, or difficulty breathing, you should get tested for COVID-19 immediately.

## **How long will the COVID-19 vaccine last once I've had two doses?**

It is not yet known how long the protection of the COVID-19 vaccine will last, but ongoing research is being conducted to monitor people's protection over time. This research will also determine whether booster doses may be required.

## **Can breastfeeding mothers get the COVID-19 vaccine?**

The Department of Health has prepared a COVID-19 vaccination decision guide for women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning pregnancy which is available on the website. Individuals are encouraged to consult this guide if they have concerns.

## How long does it take to have immunity after vaccination?

Both the Pfizer and the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines require the full two-dose course for the best immune response. While partial protection against COVID-19 may be as soon as 12 days after the first dose, this protection is likely to be short-lived. The second dose encourages the body to create stronger protection (immunity) against the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19.

Individuals may not have maximum protection until 7-14 days after their second dose of the Pfizer or AstraZeneca vaccine. Even after receiving the vaccine you can still infect others around you, so you should continue COVID-safe practices.

## Do COVID-19 vaccines cause infertility?

There is no scientific evidence to support this. None of the COVID-19 vaccines currently under review by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) cause sterilisation/infertility.

The TGA will not approve a vaccine for use in Australia unless it is safe and effective. This includes impacts on fertility.

The theory that COVID-19 vaccines cause infertility is based on the disproven idea that one of the spike proteins in COVID-19 and the Syncytin-1 protein (which help placenta development) are the same. They are not.

The COVID-19 vaccine, like other vaccines, works by training our bodies to develop antibodies to fight against the virus that causes COVID-19, to prevent future illness.

There is currently no evidence that antibodies formed from COVID-19 vaccination cause any problems with pregnancy, including the development of the placenta.

In addition, there is no evidence suggesting that fertility problems are a side effect of ANY vaccine.

People who are trying to become pregnant now or who plan to try in the future may receive the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to them.

ATAGI has also provided advice for women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning pregnancy which is available on the Department of Health website.

## How can staff who had dose 1 of the Pfizer vaccine at a dose 2 residential aged care facility clinic get the second dose?

Primary Health Networks (PHNs) are working directly with vaccine workforce providers and residential aged care facilities to implement local solutions to ensure access to people who missed out on their second Pfizer dose at a residential aged care facility.

You should let your employer know if you have missed your second dose or contact your local PHN directly.

## **If all staff and residents are vaccinated, will directions on aged care facilities be removed?**

COVID-19 vaccination is not a substitute for COVID-safe behaviour. It should supplement other public health guidelines.

The reconsideration of directions on aged care facilities under state and territory public health orders will be a decision for the relevant authority in each state and territory.

After you are vaccinated, you should continue COVID-safe measures.

## **Will relatives and friends of residents who choose not to have the COVID-19 vaccination be excluded from visiting residential aged care facilities?**

The COVID-19 vaccine is voluntary and free for all Australians. The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee has not recommended the COVID-19 vaccine be made mandatory in residential aged care.

Non-vaccinated workers, family and friends remain able to enter residential aged care facilities subject to public health directions in their location.

## **Do individuals receive a certificate of their vaccination?**

COVID-19 vaccinations are reported to the Australian Immunisation Register by the immunisation provider.

Following their vaccination, individuals will be able to access their immunisation history through their Medicare Online account, the Medicare Express Plus app and their My Health Record. If these channels are not suitable, people can request their immunisation history by phoning Services Australia.

## **Does my aged care employer need to record which staff have had the vaccine?**

It is not currently a requirement for aged care providers to record which aged care staff have been vaccinated. However, providers may choose to do so to support their risk assessments and ability to respond in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak in their area. Providers have been asked to ensure they collect and store this information in line with privacy requirements.

## **When can I return to work after getting the vaccine?**

You should be able to work before and after being vaccinated.

You may experience some mild side effects after having the vaccine, which is a sign that your immune system is kicking into gear and learning how to fight COVID-19. These side effects may make you feel unwell for a couple of days.

If you're worried about being too unwell to return to work, consider booking your appointment at the end of your shift if you're getting it at work or ahead of the weekend or a day off.

If any side effects are concerning you, you should seek medical advice.