

**Information for Correctional Staff:
Frequently Asked Questions about COVID-19 Vaccination**

Leah Rorvig, MD, MS, Director of Health Education, AMEND at UCSF
Brie Williams, MD, MS, Founder and Director, AMEND at UCSF

AMEND, a program at the University of California, San Francisco, uses public health and human rights to advance transformative changes to the policies, practices, and culture of U.S. prisons and jails.

COVID-19 Vaccination: The Basics

- Vaccines teach the immune system how to recognize and fight off the virus that causes COVID-19, which can prevent vaccinated people from getting sick.
- Vaccines prevent infection. They are not used to treat people who are infected with COVID-19.
- There are currently two vaccines available in the United States – one made by Pfizer and one made by Moderna
- Both vaccines have two doses, either three weeks apart (Pfizer) or four weeks apart (Moderna).
- The vaccine is given as a shot in the upper arm.
- The vaccines are both **95% effective** at preventing illness due to COVID-19.
- Before the pandemic even started, scientists were working on new vaccine technology. This head start allowed scientists to develop the COVID19 vaccines in record time.
- The COVID-19 vaccines have gone through all of the same steps required of any vaccine before it can be approved for use.
- The vaccines have now been administered to millions of people and have a strong record of safety.

Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe? Should I worry that the vaccine was made so quickly?

- Both vaccines were found to be safe and effective in tens of thousands of adults (including Black and Latinx people) who participated in high quality research – the same research that any new vaccine or medicine must undergo before being approved.
- Both vaccines were reviewed faster than normal, but this is because so many people are getting sick and dying of COVID-19 that it is considered a national emergency.
- Both vaccines have been authorized by the FDA (Food & Drug Administration).
- In the U.S. alone, more than 27 million people have now received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Has anyone died as a result of the COVID-19 vaccine?

No one has died from the COVID-19 vaccine. However, more than 460,000 Americans have died from COVID-19.

What are the possible side effects of the vaccine? Should I be worried about them?

- The most common side effects of the vaccine are arm soreness, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, joint pain, and fever. These side effects are more common after the second dose of the vaccine and – if they happen – usually go away within 2 days.
- These symptoms are **normal** and are a sign that your body is building protection against the virus that causes COVID-19.

- Among the millions of people who have now received the vaccine, a very small number of people have experienced severe allergic reactions to COVID-19 vaccines. If you have ever had a severe allergic reaction to a vaccine or other substance in the past, you should discuss this with the health care professionals giving you the vaccine.

The COVID-19 vaccine is an mRNA vaccine. Can it change your DNA (also called your genetic code)?

- The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines both use “messenger RNA” (also called mRNA) to teach the cells in your body to recognize the outside part of the virus that causes COVID-19. That way, if you are exposed to the virus, your immune system will stop it from making you sick.
- The COVID-19 vaccine **does not change your DNA**. mRNA is not the same as DNA, and it cannot join with your DNA to change your genetic code.

Can I get COVID-19 from the vaccine?

No. Because of how the vaccine works, **it is impossible to get COVID-19 from the vaccine**. However, the vaccine prevents 95% (and not 100%) of COVID-19 cases. Even if you have been vaccinated, if you have a cough, fever, or other symptoms, then there is a chance you could have COVID-19, and you should ask to speak to a healthcare professional and the medical leadership at your work right away.

Do I need to keep wearing a mask after I receive the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes. Unfortunately, even people who have had the COVID-19 vaccine may be able to get infected, and although the vaccine protects them from getting seriously sick, they may spread COVID-19 to others. (We do not know how common this is yet.) Until the majority of people have been vaccinated against COVID-19, everyone needs to continue wearing masks, practicing physical distancing, and frequently washing their hands.

If I already had COVID-19, do I need to get the COVID-19 vaccine?

- COVID-19 vaccination should be offered to you even if you already had COVID-19.
- COVID-19 vaccination has been shown to be safe for those who have already had COVID-19.
- Right now, research shows that reinfection with the virus that causes COVID-19 is incredibly rare in the 90 days after you first get sick with COVID-19. Therefore, the vaccine should be offered to everyone, although some health systems are currently prioritizing patients who have not already had COVID-19 while the vaccine supply is very limited.
- You should not get the vaccine if you are currently sick with COVID-19.

Is the COVID-19 vaccine mandatory (required)?

No, there is no mandatory vaccination requirement from either the state or federal government. While vaccine doses will be limited in supply at first, public health officials have fought hard to get correctional staff early access to vaccines. We hope that by telling people about the safety and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines, we can encourage people to voluntarily take the vaccine. **The AMEND team is all planning to get the vaccine and some of us have already gotten it!**

I have diabetes and/or high blood pressure. Is it safe for me to get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes. It is safe for people with health problems to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. This includes common health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, and asthma, and more serious health problems like

cancer. Only people who have had allergies to ingredients of the COVID-19 vaccine in the past should potentially not receive the vaccine – if this is the case for you, ask your doctor!

Will the COVID-19 vaccine harm my fertility?

No. There is no evidence that the vaccine affects the fertility of men or women. There is also no evidence of infertility caused by the COVID-19 virus among the many millions of men and women who have recovered from COVID-19 infection.

Is it really necessary to receive both doses of the vaccine? I heard one dose is enough.

You should take BOTH doses. The first dose of the vaccine provides some protection against illness due to COVID-19, but the second dose gives you stronger and longer lasting protection from getting sick.

Should I even bother getting this vaccine given all the mutant “variant forms” of COVID-19 I am hearing about?

Yes. Early information suggests that both vaccines continue to provide strong protection against the most common COVID-19 variants. Scientists are still studying the effect that COVID-19 variants have on how well the vaccine works. We do not yet know how this protection compares to the 95% efficacy seen in the most recent vaccine trials.

I got the COVID-19 vaccine because I want things to go back to normal. When will that happen?

We don't know when enough people will be vaccinated so that things will go back to normal. The more people that are vaccinated inside and outside of prison, the harder it will be for the disease to spread both inside and outside of prison, and the sooner things will begin to return to normal. When you get the vaccine, you protect other people around you by making it less likely for them to get COVID-19.

Did AMEND staff get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes. All of the AMEND team members who see patients already have received the COVID-19 vaccine. Other AMEND staff will receive it as soon as it is available to them.

I heard that a lot of correctional officers and/or medical staff at my facility are refusing to get the vaccine. If they aren't getting it, why should I?

There are many reasons that people are afraid to get the vaccine. These include a lack of knowledge about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine, a lack of understanding about COVID-19 itself, a long history of mistrust of the medical system, and more. **We encourage you to empower yourself to learn as much as you can about the COVID-19 vaccine.** It is important that you make your own decision about getting the vaccine regardless of what other people are doing.

I still have more questions, what should I do?

We recommend these trusted sites:

<https://covid19.ca.gov/vaccines/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html>

If you have additional ideas for questions that we can answer on future versions of this information sheet, please email us at info@amend.us or write to Amend, 490 Illinois St, Floor 8, UCSF Box 1265, San Francisco, CA 94143.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: COVID-19 Vaccination <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/info-by-product/clinical-considerations.html>
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html>
State of California COVID-19 Vaccine Information Center <https://covid19.ca.gov/vaccines/>
UCSF COVID-19 Vaccine Information Hub <https://coronavirus.ucsf.edu/vaccines>
New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/opinion/covid-vaccine-rumors.html>