

# Covid-19 vaccines: frequently asked questions

## About the vaccines

### How do the vaccines work?

Like all vaccines, the Covid-19 vaccines teach your body to fight the virus.

The vaccines work by making a protein from the virus that is important for creating protection. The protein stimulates the immune system to make antibodies and cells to fight the infection.

The components of the vaccine leave the body within a few days. The vaccines will not alter your DNA or genetic material.

### Do the vaccines include any ingredients of animal or foetal origin?

There are no animal or foetal products in either of the approved Covid-19 vaccines. The ingredients are published as part of the approval process and are available at:

- Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulatory-approval-of-pfizer-biontech-vaccine-for-covid-19>
- Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulatory-approval-of-covid-19-vaccine-astrazeneca>

Leaders from Muslim, Hindu and Jewish faiths have all said that the vaccines are suitable for people of their religions and people shouldn't hesitate to get them.

### Are the vaccines safe?

Yes. The covid-19 vaccines approved for use in the UK have met strict standards of safety and effectiveness.

They have been approved by an independent body (The Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency), which follows international standards of safety, and have gone through all the same clinical trials and safety checks that all other licensed medicines have to complete before they can be used.

The vaccines have been thoroughly tested and no safety concerns were seen in studies of more than 20,000 people of different ages and ethnic backgrounds. As of 10 February, more than 13 million people have had a Covid-19 vaccine in the UK and reports of serious side effects, such as allergic reactions, have been very rare. No long-term complications have been reported.

### Are the vaccines safe for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities?

The trials demonstrated that the vaccines are consistently safe and effective across different ethnic groups.

For the Pfizer trial, participants included 9.6% black/African, 26.1% Hispanic/Latino and 3.4% Asian. For the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine 10.1% of trial recipients were Black and 3.5% Asian. Full details are available in the Public Assessment Reports, which contain all the scientific information about the trials and information on trial participants. These can be found at:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulatory-approval-of-pfizer-biontech-vaccine-for-covid-19/summary-public-assessment-report-for-pfizerbiontech-covid-19-vaccine>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulatory-approval-of-covid-19-vaccine-astrazeneca/summary-of-the-public-assessment-report-for-astrazeneca-covid-19-vaccine>

### **How were the vaccines developed so quickly?**

The main reason that the vaccines were developed so quickly is that finding a vaccine for Covid-19 was a worldwide priority. Funding was made available very quickly and scientists across the world have worked together to develop the vaccines, which has meant they were able to complete years of work in months.

Similarly, thousands of people across the world volunteered to take part in the clinical trials, whereas it usually takes a long time to find enough volunteers for a vaccine trial.

The other factor was that all the different bodies involved in checking the safety of the vaccines worked together so this could happen as quickly as possible and sped up the administrative processes, which can often take several years. For example, usually the different phases of the clinical trials take place one after another but for the covid-19 vaccine, some of them ran at the same time to speed up the process.

### **Can the vaccines make you ill?**

You **can't** get Covid-19 from having the vaccine. As with flu, it is possible to have caught Covid-19 and not realise you have the symptoms until after your vaccination appointment but the vaccine cannot give you the virus.

### **Are there any side effects?**

Like all vaccines, the Covid-19 vaccines can cause side effects in some people. Most of these are mild and short term, and not everyone gets them. Very common side effects include:

- having a painful, heavy feeling and tenderness in the arm where you had your injection. This tends to be worst around 1-2 days after the vaccine
- feeling tired
- headache
- general aches, or mild flu like symptoms

These tend to happen in the first couple of days after the vaccination and last a few days. You can rest and take the normal dose of paracetamol (follow the advice in the packaging) to help you feel better.

If your symptoms seem to get worse or if you are concerned, call NHS 111 or your GP practice.

### **Can the vaccines affect your fertility?**

Medical experts agree that it is not possible for the vaccines to affect fertility. Like all vaccines, the covid-19 vaccines teach your body to fight the disease. They do not have any ingredients that would affect fertility and the components leave the body within a few days.

### **Can I have the vaccine during Ramadan/does the vaccine invalidate fasting?**

The British Islamic Medical Association have issued specific advice urging Muslims observing Ramadan not to delay getting the vaccine, drawing on analysis from Islamic scholars which says that injections for non-nutritional purposes do not invalidate the fast

Further information is available here: <https://britishima.org/operation-vaccination/hub/statements/#FAST>

### **Are there any people who shouldn't have the vaccine?**

People with history of a severe allergy to the ingredients of the vaccines should not be vaccinated. Clinicians will discuss this with people before vaccinating them.

### **Can I have the vaccine if I'm pregnant?**

The [Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has updated its guidance](#) to say that pregnant women can have the vaccine if they are at high risk of catching Covid-19 or have clinical conditions that put them at greater risk but they should discuss it with a doctor first.

### **Can I have the vaccine if I am breastfeeding?**

The JCVI has recommended that the vaccines can be given to women who are breastfeeding as there are no known risks to them or their baby. This is in line with recommendations from the World Health Organisation.

### **Is it safe to try to get pregnant after having the vaccine?**

There is no need for women to delay pregnancy after having the vaccination.

### **How many doses of the vaccine do I need and when?**

Both vaccines require two doses to give the maximum amount of protection. The latest advice is that the second dose is given 10-12 weeks after your first dose of the vaccine.

### **Why do I need two vaccinations?**

The evidence from the clinical trials showed that people build up better protection against COVID-19 symptoms when the vaccine is given in two, smaller doses, with an interval between them. If you don't have your second dose there is no risk to you but you will not be as well protected as you could be.

### **How effective are the COVID-19 vaccines?**

Both vaccines have been shown to be highly effective at stopping people from becoming seriously ill from Covid-19.

Like all medicines, no vaccine is completely effective – some people may still get COVID-19 despite having a vaccination, but the symptoms should be a lot less severe.

Having the vaccine prevents you becoming seriously ill from Covid-19 but you may still be able to spread it to others so it is very important to keep following the guidance – in particular, wearing a mask, washing your hands and keeping two metres apart.

### **How long do the vaccines take to work?**

Protection starts around seven days after your first dose. To get the maximum amount of protection, people need to have their second dose. Full protection takes effect around a week or two after the second dose.

### **Will the vaccines work with the new strains?**

There is currently no evidence that the new strains will be resistant to the vaccines we have, so we are continuing to vaccinate people as normal. Scientists are looking now in detail at the characteristics of the virus in relation to the vaccines. Viruses, such as the winter flu virus, often branch into different strains but these small variations rarely render vaccines ineffective.

### **How long will my vaccine be effective for?**

We expect these vaccines to work for at least a year – if not longer - but this will be constantly monitored.

### **Which vaccine will I get?**

The UK is currently using both the PfizerBioNTech and the OxfordAstraZeneca vaccines. We will have more doses of the OxfordAstraZeneca vaccines so expect this is the one most people will receive.

### **Can people pick which vaccine they want?**

No. The healthcare professional vaccinating you will have to use the vaccine that is available at the time of your appointment.

### **Is one vaccine better than the other?**

Both vaccines have been shown to be safe and highly effective. No trials have been carried out to compare the vaccines: the important thing is that they will both protect you from becoming seriously ill from Covid-19.

### **Why was the timing for second doses changed?**

The [UK Chief Medical Officers agreed](#) a longer timeframe between first and second doses so that more people can get their first dose quickly, and because the evidence shows that one dose still offers a high level of protection. This decision will mean the maximum benefit for the most people in the shortest possible time and will help save lives. Getting both doses is still important so people should return for their second vaccination at the right time so they get the maximum amount of protection.

## **Getting your vaccination**

### **Who will get a vaccine?**

It is important that the people who at the greatest risk from Covid-19 get the vaccine first. The NHS offering vaccinations in line with the [recommendations from the independent Joint Committee for Vaccinations & Immunisations \(JCVI\)](#). These are based on preventing death from Covid-19 and the need to protect health and social care staff and systems. They also reflect the fact that the single greatest risk of death from COVID-19 is age.

The first four priority groups to receive the vaccines are care home residents and staff, people aged 70 years of age and over, people who are clinically extremely vulnerable and frontline health and social care staff. The aim is to have offered first vaccinations to the people in these groups by the middle of February and then the rollout will continue through the groups in order of priority.

### **If a household has a priority group member, such as a vulnerable person, will everyone living in that household be vaccinated together?**

No. The Joint Committee for Vaccinations & Immunisations (JCVI) recommendations do not include household members of clinically vulnerable people automatically – although in some cases family members may be eligible in their own right or as carers.

### **How will people be invited for a vaccination?**

The NHS will contact people when it is their turn. Most people will either be contacted by their GP practice or receive a letter from the NHS national booking system.

We know lots of people are eager to get protected but we are asking people **not to contact the NHS** to get an appointment until they are invited to do so. The NHS is working hard to make sure those at greatest risk are offered the vaccine first and people will not be able to make an appointment until they have received their invitation.

The NHS will follow up with people that haven't booked their appointment, as a reminder.

### **Where can I get a vaccination?**

There are several different places where people can get their vaccination.

GP practices are working together to provide them to their patients from centres in local communities and they will contact patients to invite them when it is their turn.

There are also four large vaccination centres and a number of community pharmacy centres. People who are eligible for a vaccine and who live within reasonable travelling distance of one of these centres will get a letter from the NHS national booking system inviting them to make an appointment. They can then choose to book at one of these centres or to wait for their GP to invite them for an appointment.

People who are housebound will be contacted by their GP practice about alternative ways to get vaccinated.

### **Can you walk in to any of the services to get a vaccination?**

No – you can only get a vaccination if you have an appointment. People are being offered vaccinations in the order recommended by the JCVI and will be contacted when it is their turn to make an appointment, either by their GP practice or the national booking service.

Please do not turn up at any of the centres without an appointment: booking slots are carefully managed to allow for social distancing and the number of appointments is based on the supply available that day.

### **Can people get a vaccine without their NHS number or if they aren't registered with a GP?**

While the NHS can only contact people for whom we have GP records, people who don't have an NHS number or aren't registered with a GP will still be able to get vaccinated.

It does however help to be registered with a GP – as well as being invited for Covid-19 vaccinations, being registered also means you will be invited for other vaccinations and important health checks including for cancer or heart disease. Details of how to register with a GP are available at: [www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/gps/how-to-register-with-a-gp-surgery/](http://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/gps/how-to-register-with-a-gp-surgery/)

### **What if I have an allergic reaction?**

The vaccines are safe and effective for the vast majority of people – they have been tested on tens of thousands of people and assessed by experts.

Anyone with a history of a severe allergy to any of the ingredients should not have the vaccine. Everybody will be screened for potential allergic reactions before getting vaccinated. Serious allergic reactions are rare. If you do have a reaction to the vaccine, it usually happens in minutes. Staff giving the vaccine are trained to deal with allergic reactions and treat them immediately, and all centres will be equipped to care for people who need it – just like with any other vaccine.

### **Can I get a vaccine privately?**

No. Vaccinations are only available through the NHS and are free of charge. If anyone claims to be able to provide you with a vaccine for a fee, they are likely to be committing a crime and should be reported to the Police online or by calling 101.

Remember:

- The NHS will never ask you for your bank account or card details.
- The NHS will never ask you for your PIN or banking password.
- The NHS will never arrive unannounced at your home to administer the vaccine.

- The NHS will never ask you to prove your identity by sending copies of personal documents such as your passport, driving licence, bills or pay slips.

## **The NHS National Booking Service**

### **What are the operating hours of the telephone booking system?**

The telephone booking service will be open 16 hours a day (from 7am until 11pm), seven days a week. People will also be able to book online 24/7.

### **What should people do if they can't get through to the phone line straight away?**

At times, due to high demand, the phone line will get very busy, which may mean waiting on the line for a while or calling back later. People can alternatively book online. If you need help to do this please ask someone in your support bubble.

### **What information will I need to book?**

You will need to provide your name, date of birth, postcode and ideally your NHS number, which will be included on your booking letter. If you have lost your letter or don't have your NHS number, you may need to provide the name and postcode/postcode of the GP practice you are registered with – in this circumstance you should use the phone booking service.

### **Does the national booking service work for people who don't understand English well or are deaf?**

The phone line has interpreters and a BSL facility available on request to help you book your appointments.

### **What if I book an appointment through the NHS website or 119 and I need to rearrange it?**

If you need to rearrange an appointment that you booked through the NHS website, you can do this through the 'manage your appointments' section on the booking page. If you booked through 119, you can also ring to rearrange your appointment.

If you can't attend your appointment for any reason, please cancel or rearrange it so that the appointment slot can be given to someone else who needs it.

### **I've received a letter but someone I live with who is the same age hasn't yet. Can we get vaccinated together?**

The NHS is inviting eligible people in a phased basis as supplies of the vaccine allow. It is important that you wait for your letter from the NHS, and you will not be able to book without one.

If you have received a letter and live with someone who is also eligible but has not received a letter, it is likely that theirs will follow shortly. If you like you can wait and book at the same time.

### **How is the service ensuring people don't fraudulently book an appointment?**

People will be asked to provide details of their identity at the time of booking, when they arrive for their appointment and before they are vaccinated.

## **Other**

**I'm currently ill with COVID-19, can I get the vaccine?**

If you have Covid-19 or are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms you should not receive the COVID-19 vaccine until you have recovered. The guidance says this should be at least four weeks after the start of symptoms or from the date of a positive Covid-19 test.

**Should people who have already had Covid or are suffering from 'Long Covid' get vaccinated?**

Yes, if they are in one of the priority groups identified by JCVI. Getting vaccinated is just as important for those who have already had Covid-19 as it is for those who haven't, including people who have mild residual symptoms. Where people are suffering significant ongoing complications from Covid they should discuss whether or not to have a vaccine now with a clinician.

**I have had my flu vaccine, do I need the COVID-19 vaccine as well?**

The flu vaccine does not protect you from COVID-19 so you need to have both.

**Do I need to leave a space between having the flu vaccine and having the Covid vaccine?**

It is not essential to leave time between the flu and Covid vaccine but it is recommended that there should be a gap of a week. THE NHS always encourages anyone who is eligible for a flu jab to have it as soon as possible.

**Can I still attend my appointment during the national lockdown?**

Yes. Getting the COVID-19 vaccine, or any other vaccine, is an important medical appointment and so is within the rules wherever you live. Vaccinations will continue as normal in all areas through the national lockdown and beyond. If you have booked or are offered an appointment, please attend it.