

COVID-19 VACCINATION

Information for people affected by cancer

There are many questions being raised about Australia's COVID-19 vaccination program by patients, families and carers affected by cancer. This fact sheet addresses some of these questions about the COVID-19 vaccines.

Recommendation for cancer patients

Some types of cancer and their treatment increase the risk of catching COVID-19 and having a more severe illness. Vaccination against COVID-19 is therefore highly recommended. The vaccine reduces your risk of getting sick from COVID-19 and helps reduce the chance of spreading COVID-19 to others.

How your immune system responds to the vaccine may be influenced by your own general health and your cancer treatment. We know from studies of COVID-19 vaccine in patients with cancer that the level of response or protection from vaccination may be lower compared to people without cancer.

Even after receiving the vaccine, it is important for people affected by cancer and their close contacts to continue protective measures including physical distancing, hand hygiene and the use of masks.

In addition, if you develop symptoms, early testing is important as there are treatments available that could help reduce the severity of infection.

Vaccine safety

There are four COVID-19 vaccines available in Australia – Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Novavax. All vaccines have passed Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration's assessment and approval processes that assess vaccine safety, quality, and effectiveness.

They do not contain the live virus that causes COVID-19 and therefore there is no risk of catching the infection from the vaccines.

All individuals should follow Australia-wide advice on which vaccines to take, based on their age and medical history.

Number of doses

It is recommended to have a primary vaccination course followed by booster doses.

For patients with blood cancer and most cancer patients on active therapy, three primary doses are recommended followed by booster doses.

Booster doses are needed to keep you up to date with your COVID-19 vaccinations. Ask your doctor about the latest booster dose recommendations.

Vaccination and cancer treatment

While it is ideal to get vaccinated before starting treatment, a patient receiving cancer treatment (chemotherapy, radiotherapy) can still safely get vaccinated. Your doctor will be able to discuss timing of vaccination with you, as with some therapies it may be preferable to avoid vaccination during certain treatment periods. This is to avoid confusion around possible side effects and whether they have been caused by the vaccine or your cancer treatment.

Patients with blood cancer

People with a blood cancer diagnosis (myeloma, lymphoma or leukaemia) are at increased risk of complications from COVID-19 infection. Vaccination against COVID-19 is therefore highly recommended, as long as the person does not have a serious allergy to components of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Stem cell transplants

For people who have had an autologous or allogeneic stem cell transplant, vaccination is recommended at least three months after your transplant. Even if you have been vaccinated for COVID-19 prior to the transplant, vaccination with three primary doses as well as booster doses after your transplant is recommended.

Side effects

Common side effects from the vaccine have typically been mild and short-lived – like pain or redness at the injection site. Up to half of all vaccinated people will experience some general side effects such as tiredness, headache, muscle aches and fever. You should seek medical advice if, for example, you develop a fever, with shivering and sweating or if unexpected symptoms such as severe headache or chest pain appear or persist following vaccination.

Previous severe reactions to vaccinations

If you have had a severe allergic reaction to a vaccine in the past, or to a particular type of the COVID-19 vaccine, you should discuss the type of reaction you had with your doctor. You may be referred to specialised vaccination clinics for further assessment and, if suitable, for vaccination under close supervision.

Get your flu vaccine

It is important for people with cancer to have your flu vaccine. It is safe to get your flu vaccine at the same time as your COVID-19 vaccine or booster.

Where can you get vaccinated?

The COVID-19 vaccines are available in [state-run vaccination centres](#), general practices and community pharmacies. Visit the [Department of Health website](#) for more information.

Further information

- Australian Department of Health [COVID-19 vaccine webpage](#)
- Cancer Australia's [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about the COVID-19 vaccines
- Melbourne Vaccine Education Centre's [Frequently Asked Questions on COVID-19 vaccines](#)
- National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance [Frequently Asked Questions on COVID-19 vaccines](#)
- [National Coronavirus Helpline: 1800 020 080](#). Ask for an interpreter if needed.
- Anyone affected by cancer can contact [Cancer Council](#) on **13 11 20** for information and support. Available 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. If you need a translator to use this service, call **13 14 50**.
- Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre patients on active treatment can contact their [Peter Mac Patient Navigator](#) Monday to Friday, 8.00am - 4.30pm or call the main reception on **(03) 8559 5000**

Patients on active treatment at other health care facilities should contact their treating team.
*In the event of an emergency, please dial **000** for an ambulance.*

