COVID-19 Vaccine FAQs

Why should I get vaccinated for COVID-19?

People with substance use disorders (SUD) may be at a higher risk for serious complications if they contract COVID-19 [1]. When someone contracts COVID-19, they can spread the virus to others who may also become ill. The COVID-19 vaccine may protect you from getting seriously ill from COVID-19 and can decrease the likelihood of spreading the virus to others [2].

Why are people with a substance use disorder more vulnerable to COVID-19?

SUD can harm or weaken the body, including the immune system, heart, and lungs, which increases the risk of contracting and developing severe complications from COVID-19. For this reason, the CDC lists SUD as an underlying medical condition that increases the risk of severe illness from COVID-19 [1]. Doctors recommend individuals with a SUD vaccinate for COVID-19 to protect themselves and their loved ones.

How does the vaccine work?

Normally when a virus enters your body, your immune system fights it and gets rid of it. Your immune cells keep a memory of how they fought the virus so that they can fight it off even more efficiently the next time. The COVID-19 vaccine uses this same natural process by exposing your immune system to a non-infectious virus or viral fragment that trains it to fight the virus that causes COVID-19 so that if you later are exposed to the virus your immune system is prepared to fight it [3].

What is the difference between Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech, and Johnson & Johnson?

All three vaccines are safe and effective. The Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines are mRNA vaccines, which use a blueprint of a protein (called mRNA) to teach the body to defend itself against COVID-19. Johnson & Johnson's vaccine is a viral vector vaccine, which uses a harmless virus different from the one that causes COVID-19 to teach the body to fight the COVID-19 virus. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is administered as 1 dose, while Moderna and Pfizer are administered as 2 doses, given 28 days (Moderna) or 21 days (Pfizer) apart. Pfizer-BioNTech currently can be given to those 12 and older while Johnson & Johnson and Moderna are currently approved for those 18 and older, though this may expand in the near future [4].

How can the vaccine be safe if it was developed so quickly?

Millions of people have safely received the COVID-19 vaccine in the U.S. These vaccines have undergone the most intensive safety monitoring and testing in U.S. history and continue to be monitored. Although the technology behind the vaccines may seem new, vaccines have been used for over a century. Viral vector vaccines (Johnson & Johnson) have been used since the 1970s and mRNA vaccines (Moderna/Pfizer) have been studied for over 20 years. One reason it was possible to develop the COVID-19 vaccines quickly was

because viral vector and mRNA technology had already been studied. Additionally, unprecedented scientific cooperation, massive amounts of funding, and the widespread nature of the virus allowed development and clinical trials for the vaccines to occur more quickly, without compromising the FDA's rigorous safety standards [4,5].

Will the vaccine make me sick?

The vaccine doesn't give you COVID-19 and you won't test positive for COVID-19 afterwards. However, you can still get sick with COVID-19 if you are infected right before receiving the vaccine or in the few days after, since it takes two weeks after the last dose to provide full immunity. Some people may feel short-term side effects after getting the vaccine, like a sore arm, tiredness, headache, fever, or chills. These are normal and mean that the vaccine is working to teach your body to fight the virus [2,5,6].

Do I need to pay for the vaccine? Can I get the vaccine if I don't have health insurance?

The vaccine is free and you do not need health insurance to receive it. If you have private health insurance or other coverage (Medicare, Medicaid), these may be charged an administration fee when you receive the vaccine, however you should not have to pay anything out-of-pocket [2,5].

Do I need the vaccine if I have already been sick with COVID-19?

Yes, even if you have had COVID-19 previously, doctors still recommended that you get vaccinated. This is because the natural immunity you have after being sick is short-term and so you can become sick with COVID-19 again, which is a health risk. The vaccine provides you with immunity without the risk of getting ill from it [2].

How do I get vaccinated?

The vaccine is available at a wide variety of different sites, like doctor's offices, pharmacies, grocery stores, and vaccine clinics. Different places will have different rules on whether you need to schedule an appointment beforehand or if you can walk-in anytime to get the vaccine.

*If you need help finding where you can get vaccinated or have any other questions, the Addiction Policy Forum's cost-free **Vaccine Navigator Initiative** can help. To get started, visit* **https://www.addictionpolicy.org/navigator-request** *and fill out the form or* **call/text 833-301-HELP**.

References
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