

COVID-19 Vaccination and Cancer

Frequently asked questions

With Australia's COVID-19 vaccination program now underway, we know you probably have many questions about the vaccines and your cancer treatment. Below is a list of frequently asked questions and answers.

What vaccines are available for COVID-19 in Australia?

There are three vaccines that have been secured by Australia. Two have been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and have been used in Victoria's vaccination rollout.

- Pfizer (USA) / BioNTech (Germany) vaccine – often referred to as the Pfizer vaccine – requires two doses, three weeks apart.
- Oxford University (UK) / AstraZeneca (UK/Sweden) vaccine – often referred to as the AstraZeneca vaccine – requires two doses, 12 weeks apart.
- The third vaccine, Novavax (USA) – often referred to as the Novavax vaccine, is still being studied and has not yet been TGA-approved for use in Australia.

The vaccines will train our immune system to recognise the COVID-19 virus and fight it more quickly and effectively if you encounter this virus in the future.

Are they effective in patients with cancer?

The COVID-19 vaccines have not been studied specifically in patients with cancer. How your immune system responds may be influenced by your own general health and your cancer treatment.

We also know from studies of other vaccines (such as the influenza vaccine) in patients with cancer that the level of response or protection to vaccination may be lower compared to people without cancer. This means the steps that you have taken to reduce your risk of infection, such as physical distancing, hand hygiene and use of masks, remain important even after vaccination.

Are the vaccines safe for patients with cancer?

Both of the available COVID-19 vaccines – Pfizer and AstraZeneca – are safe and recommended for all Australian adults, including patients with cancer and those in remission.

Both have passed Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration's rigorous assessment and approval processes that assess vaccine safety, quality and effectiveness.

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

How were the vaccines developed and approved so quickly?

Although some of the technology (e.g. mRNA vaccines) is new to COVID-19, researchers have been developing and testing this technology for other infections for several years. All necessary stages in vaccine development and testing were carried out thoroughly, as for any human vaccine, and independent national authorities only approved the vaccines when they were satisfied that the vaccines were safe and effective. COVID-19 vaccine trials recruited people faster than previous vaccines because more people were willing to participate, and with more virus infections around to see if the vaccine was working, the trials reached their testing target rapidly. No shortcuts have been taken.

The Department of Health website provides details on how the COVID 19 vaccines were developed and approved.

Should patients with cancer have these vaccines?

Some types of cancer and their treatment increase the risk of catching COVID-19 and of a poorer outcome from the 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.

Patients with cancer have been vaccinated in other countries, including the United States, United Kingdom and Israel, and there have been no reports of safety issues or concerns.



Will vaccines interfere with cancer treatments?

Based on how the vaccines work, we do not anticipate that the vaccines will reduce the effectiveness of cancer treatments. Patients on immunotherapy should be monitored by their treating team for any unexpectedly stronger response to the vaccine or their cancer treatment.

Patients on cancer treatment have been vaccinated in other countries and there have been no reports of unexpected side effects.

Your doctor will be able to discuss timing of vaccination with you, as it would be preferable to avoid vaccination during an active cycle of therapy. This is to avoid confusion around possible side effects of each treatment. When possible, we would try to time vaccination during an 'off' week during the cycle.

We also recommend the vaccination for patients who have had an autologous or allogenic stem cell transplant. For the best response, we recommend these patients have the vaccination at least three months after their transplant.

What are the 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 more general side effects such as tiredness, headache, muscle aches, and fever.

The small number of people who develop a fever are advised to seek medical advice if, for example, the fever is accompanied by shivering and sweating.

Can I get the influenza and the COVID-19 vaccines?

An annual influenza vaccination is generally recommended. Your doctor can advise on timing, as the current recommended gap between a dose of seasonal influenza vaccine and a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine is at least 14 days.

If I have had a severe reaction to vaccinations before, what should I do?

You should discuss the type of reaction you had to the particular vaccine with your doctor or specialist. You can be referred to specialised vaccination clinics for further assessment and if suitable, for vaccination under close supervision.



How or when can I receive these vaccines?

COVID-19 vaccines will be free in Australia. Generally, patients with cancer are in Phase 1b of the Australian Government vaccination program. Patients should call their GP or refer to the current COVID-19 roll out strategy for information on when and where they will receive the vaccine.

Where can I ask for advice?

- Ring your GP
- Andrew Love Cancer Centre – Dayward CNAC unit.
Monday – Friday (0800-1800)
4215 2732
- Barwon Health UHG Baxter 6
(after hours) 4215 0000

Where can I find more information?

- Visit the Australian Department of Health COVID-19 vaccine webpage
- View the Melbourne Vaccine Education Centre’s Frequently Asked Questions on COVID-19 vaccines
- View the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance Frequently Asked Questions on COVID-19 vaccines
- Call the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080, and ask for an interpreter if needed.
- Contact Cancer Council Victoria’s cancer nurses on 13 11 20, who can provide information and support services to anyone affected by cancer - whether it's patients, carers, family, friends, workplaces or health professionals. The nurses are available from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. If you need a translator to use this service, call 13 14 50.

