

COVID-19

10 things healthcare workers need to know about COVID-19 vaccines

15 January 2021

1. Why do we need a vaccine against COVID-19?

COVID-19 is easily transmitted and can lead to long-term serious illness and death, even for people who are young and healthy. An effective COVID-19 vaccine is going to be one important way to protect people from this disease.

2. When will we have COVID-19 vaccines to use in the general population?

Right now there are not enough doses of COVID-19 vaccines for the entire population. Therefore, vaccines will need to be introduced in phases and countries must prioritize the population to be vaccinated in the first phases, based on the values framework, epidemiological scenario and other considerations, such as presence of comorbidities and sociodemographic risks.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) considers frontline health workers to be the highest priority group to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

3. Why are frontline health workers going to be among the first to be vaccinated for COVID-19?

Frontline health workers are prioritized because:

- They are at higher risk of being infected with COVID-19, and possibly at a higher risk of complications or death. There is also a risk that they can spread COVID-19 to people—like their patients—who are at high risk of complications or death.
- They work under intense and challenging conditions and put themselves at higher risk in order to help others as part of the COVID-19 response.
- They are essential to their communities and keep health systems running.

4. How do we know COVID-19 vaccines were developed in a safe and effective manner?

Vaccine safety is always a top priority. All vaccines go through different trial phases before they can be approved for use in the population. The trial phases aim to ensure the safety of the vaccine, if and how well it can protect against disease, and other aspects like the number of doses and who could be vaccinated. The vaccines that are being developed against COVID-19 are following these same trial phases, but in some cases the phases might

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overlap or be sped up when enough data is available. The trials are progressing at the fastest pace we've seen for any vaccine, while still following all safety guidelines. This is for many reasons, including unprecedented united global efforts around vaccine development, building on mRNA technology that's been in development for years, and research from previous coronaviruses like MERS and SARS¹.

Once COVID-19 vaccines are approved for their broad use in the population, they will continue to be monitored to identify any unexpected adverse effects to ensure the safety of the vaccines. This monitoring is a routine part of immunization programs.

5. Why have I heard about clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines being paused for safety concerns?

Safety is a main focus for vaccine clinical trials. When an unexplained medical event—which may or may not be related to the vaccine being evaluated—happens to someone participating in a trial, it is normal to investigate. Temporarily pausing vaccine clinical trials is not unusual while researchers gather more information. This shows that the manufacturers and researchers are doing everything in their power to ensure a safe and effective vaccine.

6. What things do we still not know about COVID-19 vaccines?

As of January 2021, there are still many unknowns for most of the COVID-19 candidate vaccines being developed². These include: which vaccines will be successful, how many vaccines will be available and when, the number of doses and schedule, cold chain requirements, how the vaccines will be administered and other questions.

Of those vaccines that have been granted Emergency Use Authorizations, we still do not know the duration of protection, the possibility of co-administering COVID-19 vaccines with other vaccines, and how many doses will be needed. These questions will be answered in the coming months, as the candidate vaccines are further tested.

7. Who would be the next groups to receive a vaccine after frontline health workers?

The World Health Organization (WHO) and its Strategic Advisory Group on Immunizations (SAGE) have published guidance known as the values framework for the allocation and prioritization of COVID-19 vaccination³ to help countries choose their priority groups for

¹ World Health Organization. EPI-WIN updates: COVID-19 Vaccine Development. WHO; 2020. Available at: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/risk-comms-updates/update45-vaccinesdevelopment.pdf?sfvrsn=13098bfc_5

² For detailed information on each candidate vaccine please visit [WHO Draft Landscape](#).

³ World Health Organization. WHO SAGE values framework for the allocation and prioritization of COVID-19 vaccination. WHO; 2020. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/334299>.

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vaccination based on their values, the epidemiological situation, and sociodemographic factors. PAHO's Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on Immunizations has also endorsed this document. Other groups besides frontline health workers who have been identified as priority groups include at-risk groups like older adults and adults with underlying health conditions. Each country will adapt these recommendations to their context, and recommendations for specific vaccines will be provided when the vaccines are available for use in the general public.

8. As a healthcare worker, what is my role in COVID-19 vaccine introduction?

Frontline health workers will likely be among the first to receive COVID-19 vaccines and as such, have an important responsibility to lead by example for their friends, family and coworkers. In many communities, health workers are the most trusted source of vaccine information. By answering patients' questions or clarifying myths, health workers will play a critical role in helping to build confidence in the vaccine.

Also, health workers that will be part of vaccination efforts will be trained in the administration and management of the cold chain when vaccines are approved and available for broad use.

9. How should I respond if people ask me questions about COVID-19 vaccines?

Many people have questions regarding the COVID-19 vaccines, and they might look to you, a health worker, as a trusted source for answers. If people come to you with concerns, listen to them empathetically and do not judge them. Listen carefully so you can understand what exactly they're asking about and acknowledge their concerns. Correct any misinformation, rumors or misperceptions. Emphasize the safety of the vaccines and their benefits in preventing disease.

Be transparent and honest in your conversations. If you do not know the answer to their questions, say so, and offer a trusted resource where they can find more information, such as a website from the Ministry of Health or WHO⁴, or a printed material at the health center.

10. What can we expect from COVID-19 during the influenza season?

PAHO encourages all health workers to get vaccinated against influenza, since we expect both influenza viruses and SARS-CoV-2 to be circulating during the influenza season. As of December 2020, preliminary data has shown that the precautions taken against COVID-19, such as wearing a mask and physical distancing, might be working to slow the spread of

⁴ For more information visit:

- [PAHO COVID-19 Vaccines](#)
- [WHO COVID-19 Vaccines](#)

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influenza viruses as well. However, it is still important to continue with these precautions and get vaccinated against influenza in order to prevent overwhelming the hospitals and spreading influenza.

Want to learn more?

- Pan American Health Organization. Communicating about Vaccine Safety: Guidelines to help health workers communicate with parents, caregivers, and patients [internet]. PAHO; 2020. Available at: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/53167>
- Pan American Health Organization. Frequently Asked Questions about COVID-19 Candidate Vaccines and Access Mechanisms. Version 3, 6 January 2021. PAHO; 2021. Available at: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/53195>

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