

Answers to key questions around COVID-19

March 2021

Answers to important questions about COVID-19 vaccines

Q: How do we overcome anti-vaccine sentiment and myths around vaccination?

A: It's important that we confront anti-vaccine sentiment – and any misinformation around COVID-19 vaccines – with credible content and well-considered responses.

First, the approved vaccines have been developed by big and well-established companies that have been around for decades. They employ thousands of scientists and doctors, and these are the people who have developed the vaccines, giving us a significant sense of the calibre of people who are working on vaccine development.

There are many excellent reasons why these vaccines have been developed so quickly, including unprecedented access to funding, the global priority placed on their development and access to thousands of trial participants. These vaccines have also undergone rigorous testing in every phase of the clinical trial process and been tested across massive groups of participants (up to 60 000 people) once they have reached the phase 3 clinical trial phase. The results of these clinical trials so far demonstrate high levels of efficacy (most well over 90%) and safety.

Keep in mind that COVID-19 vaccines are only approved if two requirements are met:

- The vaccine is safe.
- The vaccine is effective.

South Africa also has a very strong regulator, namely the South Africa Health Product Regulatory Authority (SAPHRA). This regulator is responsible for approving all medicines and vaccines for use in South Africa and conducts in-depth and extensive scientific analysis of the safety and efficacy clinical data of all medical products, before approving their use in South Africa.

Also, getting vaccinated is a far more 'natural' way of preventing disease than taking other pharmaceutical products.

Q: We will have access to a number of different vaccines. Are they all equal in efficacy?

A: All the vaccines that we will have access to in South Africa are required to meet a minimum standard of efficacy to be effective on a population basis. And, the COVID-19 vaccines that have been approved for use are well above these levels of efficacy, at around 90% for most.

Where a two-dose vaccine regimen is indicated, people will receive the same vaccine in the first and second round.

Q: Will it be compulsory to be vaccinated?

A: People cannot be forced to be vaccinated. The COVID-19 vaccine is a medical treatment, and medical treatments cannot be made compulsory. South Africa's constitution protects our rights in this regard and President Cyril Ramaphosa has reiterated this many times. However, people will be strongly encouraged to be vaccinated to protect themselves and those they interact with, whether loved ones or colleagues, or others in the wider community.

Q: Can employers access COVID-19 vaccines themselves and run their own vaccine drives?

A: There are two parts to this answer:

- It's critical that we drive equitable access to vaccination. We must all follow the national rollout plan. This means that all people will have the option to be vaccinated according to where they fall into South Africa's three-phased rollout. In our view, it would be completely unethical and unfair for a young, healthy person to access a COVID-19 vaccine ahead of a healthcare worker, an at-risk person or an older person. Vaccine access cannot be linked to one's socio-economic status or resources. We must follow our country's rollout plan and ensure fair, carefully considered access to vaccines.
- Employers cannot legally import COVID-19 vaccines. Until a vaccine is registered in South Africa and unless an entity has a licence to import and distribute this vaccine, it is illegal to import any parallel medical products or vaccines. Additionally, if an employer imported vaccines without the necessary approvals and licences and someone receiving that vaccine experienced an adverse reaction, the consequences for the employer would be dire. We ask that employers work alongside us and our Business for South Africa colleagues to accelerate the procurement of reliable, safe vaccines to all South Africans.

Q: Will we need a COVID-19 vaccination every year?

A: We do not know yet.

We are not sure how long vaccine-induced immunity will last and what levels of immunity the vaccine will stimulate. We understand short-term efficacy but need more data to understand long-term immunity. We certainly hope that this vaccine will not be needed as frequently as the flu vaccine (which is needed annually due to the speed at which influenza virus variants develop). However, it's important that the data be analysed over the long term before we can answer this question.

Q: How serious are COVID-19 vaccine side effects?

A: We have seen very minor or no side effects in other countries where vaccine rollout process are under way. The most common side effects are some pain around the injection site that lasts a few hours and resolves within a day, as well as other flu-like side effects that also resolve very quickly and are indicative of the immune response taking place.

The more severe adverse events are extremely rare. In most instances, adverse reactions linked to vaccines are far lower than adverse events linked to taking medicines. As evidence of this, latest statistics indicate just 2.8 severe adverse events per million vaccinations for the Moderna vaccine. This means the likelihood of severe adverse events is extremely low and extremely rare.

There will also be health professionals on site at every vaccination centre to immediately manage any potential adverse event that might occur.