

The Coronavirus Pandemic – Answering Your Questions

What can teens expect when getting a COVID-19 vaccine?

Are you excited to get a COVID-19 vaccine? Maybe a bit nervous? People have different feelings about getting vaccines — and individuals even sometimes have different feelings about different vaccines. An array of feelings is normal, but sometimes it helps knowing what to expect.

Teen vaccine eligibility

As of May 2021, three COVID-19 vaccines are authorized for use in the United States — Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson/Janssen. Of these, only the Pfizer vaccine is approved for ages 12 and older, with the other two vaccines currently approved for ages 18 and older. Clinical trials determined that the Pfizer vaccine is safe and works well in those 12 years and older. Clinical trials of the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines are underway for teens and children, and Pfizer is currently testing their vaccine in those younger than 12 years of age.

Preparing to get the vaccine

Most immunization sites require appointments, though some may have “walk-in” hours for eligible people to get vaccinated. This varies widely from state to state, so you should check how things are being done in your area.

A few other considerations are important before going for a COVID-19 vaccine:

- If you have a history of severe allergic reactions (i.e., you carry an “epi pen”), a compromised immune system, or a health condition that might interfere with getting the vaccine, check with your healthcare provider to figure out if you can get the COVID-19 vaccine. You may be able to get it, but you may need to take special precautions. For example, some people are recommended to wait for 30 minutes of observation instead of 15 minutes after getting the vaccine.
- Unless you regularly take a pain-relieving medication prescribed by your doctor, it is not recommended to take a pain reliever (such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen) before vaccination. These types of medications may affect how well the vaccine works. However, it is important not to stop taking a medication prescribed by your doctor before getting the vaccine without first checking that it would be safe to do so.
- You may go to a vaccination site in your community, a local pharmacy, or your doctor’s office to get the vaccine. This also depends on how your state is handling COVID-19 vaccine distribution.

What to expect when getting the vaccine

If you are going to get a COVID-19 vaccine, here is an idea of what you may experience:

- Before you go to the immunization site, remember to wear a mask and plan to social distance the same way you would in any other public space during the pandemic. Wear clothing that makes it easy to access your upper arm without removing your shirt. Take any appointment confirmation, identification, or other items requested by the site. You may also want to take your immunization record, so they can check if you are up to date on other vaccines, and a book or your phone to pass time spent waiting. In some cases, you may be asked to read information about the vaccine and complete a form on the computer before you go to the appointment.
- When you arrive, you will most likely be asked to sign in or confirm your appointment and eligibility. The health care professionals at the site will probably ask you and your parent or guardian a few questions before you get the vaccine. For example, they may ask if you have any history of severe allergic reaction or if you are allergic to certain things.
- After you are signed in, you may need to wait for your turn to get vaccinated. Waiting areas should be set up with social distancing measures to ensure everyone’s safety.
- When it is your turn, the person giving the vaccine may ask you a few more questions. For example, they might confirm your name, ask in which arm you want the vaccine, or repeat questions about allergies or other vaccines. This repetition helps ensure that people are safely and appropriately vaccinated. It is particularly important at vaccination clinics where many people are coming and going.
- When the vaccine is administered, it does not take long and usually feels like a pinch. Many people find it helpful to distract themselves during the shot by looking at something across the room or talking to someone. If you feel nervous about getting the vaccine, you could also try listening to music or playing with an app to distract yourself. Other ways to decrease your nervousness include taking a few slow, deep breaths as the vaccine is given or blowing away the pain. To do this, ask for an alcohol pad to be rubbed on your opposite wrist shortly before the vaccine is administered. As the vaccine is given, blow on the area with the alcohol; you will feel the cool temperature of the alcohol evaporating more than the shot.

- After the shot is complete, you will most likely be asked to go to a waiting area. People are asked to wait 15 to 30 minutes in case they have any allergic reactions to the vaccine. Although rare, these reactions typically occur soon after getting the vaccine, which is why people are asked to wait.
- At some point during the appointment, you should receive a vaccination card that tells you which COVID-19 vaccine you received and the date you received it. Some people immediately take a picture of this card, so if it is misplaced, they still have the information. While it may be tempting to post a picture of your vaccination card on social media, it is not recommended to do so as the card may have personal information that should not be made public. Some vaccination sites have selfie stations or offer stickers that provide alternative ways to share your vaccination experience with your followers.
- Since the Pfizer vaccine is a two-dose vaccine, you may also be asked to sign up for a second appointment. The site will let you know the correct timing for your second injection. Many sites do the second appointment scheduling during the post-vaccine observation period.
- You may also be asked if you are up to date on other vaccines, so that you can get those while you are getting the COVID-19 vaccine. But it is not clear if all vaccination sites will be offering this service. Teens may need vaccines such as Tdap, HPV, or meningococcal vaccines (one or both versions). Some may also need to catch up on vaccines typically given at younger ages, like MMR, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, polio, or chickenpox. While getting multiple vaccines may make you nervous, particularly if you don't like shots, don't let the possibility deter you from getting your COVID-19 vaccine. Remember, getting a vaccine is much faster and less painful than any of these diseases.

What to expect after getting the vaccine

Getting a COVID-19 vaccine is similar to other immunizations. Some people have side effects while others do not. Side effects are a sign that your body is responding to the vaccine, but don't worry if you don't have side effects — it doesn't mean the vaccine didn't work. People's immune systems respond differently. The most common side effects are pain, redness or swelling at the injection site or tiredness, low-grade fever, or muscle aches for a day or two after getting the vaccine. For the mRNA vaccines, these side effects tend to be more common after the second dose.

To help scientists monitor vaccine side effects, your parent can sign up for V-Safe to report any side effects that you feel. V-safe is a vaccine monitoring program developed by the CDC. This program will send check-in text messages after each dose of vaccine to gather data on any side effects you may experience. This system helps with continuing to monitor vaccine safety, particularly in different groups of people. Individuals across the country have participated in the program. Hopefully, you will consider participating, too, so that scientists can gather information about the vaccine experience of young people.

Immune responses develop a couple of weeks after getting the last dose. Right now, we know that most people who completed the full course of coronavirus vaccine are unlikely to get sick from COVID-19. However, we are still studying how long protection lasts. So far, we know it lasts for at least 6 months. Vaccinated individuals should continue to follow the guidance related to mask wearing and social distancing suggested by the CDC and local health authorities. It may be different for people who are fully vaccinated, which occurs two weeks after getting the second dose. As more people get vaccinated, more restrictions will be lifted. For this reason, it is important that everyone who can get vaccinated do so — not only for themselves, but also for those around them and for the community at large.

Think about it:

- 1) *Why do you think it is important to do vaccine clinical trials on teens and children rather than relying on the findings in adults?*
- 2) *How do you think the experience of a teen receiving a vaccine would be different from that of an adult?*

Related resources

Your COVID-19 Vaccine Appointment, CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/expect.html>

Age Groups and Vaccines: Teens/College, VEC, <https://www.chop.edu/centers-programs/vaccine-education-center/age-groups-and-vaccines/teens-college-students>

Questions and Answers about COVID-19 vaccines, VEC, www.COVIDVaccineAnswers.org

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This article, and other questions from “The Coronavirus Pandemic – Answering Your Questions” series, can be accessed at <https://vaccinemakers.org/news-events/coronavirus-pandemic-answering-your-questions>.