Getting a COVID-19 Shot When You Have Cancer

Do I need a COVID-19 vaccine (shot) when I have cancer?

Yes. COVID-19 shots are recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for nearly everyone, including people with cancer and cancer survivors. Talk with your doctor about when to get the COVID-19 shot, so you can get the best protection during and after your cancer treatment.

The COVID-19 shot helps your body develop protection against the COVID-19 virus (coronavirus). This is especially important when you have cancer because cancer and treatment can weaken your immune system. This means you are more likely to get sick from COVID-19.

Getting a COVID-19 vaccine helps even if you do get the virus. You are less likely to become very sick or need to go to the hospital. Serious complications of COVID-19 may include shortness of breath, pneumonia, blood clots, heart problems, kidney problems, organ failure, and acute respiratory distress syndrome.

What COVID-19 vaccines are available?

Viruses like COVID-19 can change over time. Experts have developed new vaccines to fight new versions of the virus. Three of the COVID-19 vaccines available in the United States were updated in autumn 2023:

- Pfizer-BioNTech, an mRNA vaccine
- Moderna, an mRNA vaccine
- Novavax, a protein subunit vaccine

All the updated shots are effective at preventing serious illness. No one vaccine is recommended over the others.

Staying up to date with the recommended vaccines will give you the best protection against COVID-19. You need an updated shot even if you have already had COVID-19. If you have had COVID-19 recently, it is recommended you wait about 60 days before getting your updated vaccination if you had not already had it.

Which COVID-19 shot(s) should I get?

The CDC's recommendations vary depending on your COVID-19 vaccination status and how long it has been since your last shot. (**Note**: COVID-19 vaccine schedules differ slightly for children under 12.)

If you were last vaccinated against COVID-19 before September 12, 2023, you should get 1 dose of the updated autumn 2023 Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, or Novavax vaccine.

What to Expect When You Get a COVID-19 Shot

Your doctor's office is just one place to get a COVID-19 shot. Most pharmacies also have them available. You can also search vaccines.gov, text your ZIP code to 438829, or call 1-800-232-0233.

Things to know:

- The shot is usually given in the upper arm, near the shoulder.
- You can choose which arm. You may want to choose the arm you use less (non-dominant) in case the shot makes it sore for a while.
- A short-sleeved or sleeveless shirt or blouse can make getting the shot easier.
- You can receive the COVID-19 vaccine at the same time as other seasonal vaccines, such as the flu shot and the RSV vaccine.

Be sure to tell the person giving you the shot, such as the pharmacist, about your cancer and any treatment. Also let them know if you have ever had an allergic reaction to the COVID-19 vaccine or any of its ingredients.

The most common side effects of the COVID-19 vaccines include pain at the injection site, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, nausea, and fever. Side effects are to be expected and should go away within 3 days.

If you have NOT been vaccinated against COVID-19, it is not too late to protect yourself and your loved ones. You should get EITHER:

- ▶ 1 updated Pfizer-BioNTech or updated Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, OR
- 2 doses of updated Novavax COVID-19 vaccine. The second dose should be given 8 weeks after the first dose.

Consider wearing a mask in public until you are fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

If you are moderately or severely immunocompromised, you may need additional doses of the updated COVID-19 vaccines. This includes people in active cancer treatment, those with certain blood cancers (such as leukemia or lymphoma), or people who have had a bone marrow/stem cell or organ transplant. Talk with your doctor about whether you need extra shots and the best timing to receive your COVID vaccination.

The person who will give your COVID-19 shot needs to know about your cancer, treatment, and any planned treatment before giving you the vaccine.

When is the best time to get an updated COVID-19 vaccine?

If you have not received the updated 2023–2024 COVID-19 vaccine, you can receive it now. If you have had a recent COVID-19 infection, wait about 60 days (2 months) before receiving the updated vaccine. Immunity to the virus after vaccination and/or infection weakens with time, and some cancer treatments, like chemotherapy, may lessen the vaccine's effectiveness. Therefore, it is ideal to receive the vaccine before starting these treatments. It is safe also to receive the vaccine at any time during your treatment. Talk with your oncologist and your primary care doctor to plan the best time for you to be vaccinated. Also, you may need to get vaccinated again if you have received a bone marrow or stem cell transplant or are having other cellular therapy, such as chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy.

Words to know

Acute respiratory distress syndrome: A lung condition that causes dangerously low blood oxygen.

Cellular therapy: A form of immunotherapy that uses cells from the immune system to fight cancer.

Chemotherapy: The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells.

Immunotherapy: A treatment using medication designed to boost the body's natural defenses to fight cancer.

Immune system: The body's natural infection-fighting system.

mRNA vaccine: A vaccine that uses genetic material created in a laboratory to trigger the body's immune response.

Pneumonia: An infection of the air sacs in the lungs.

Protein subunit vaccine: A vaccine that contains pieces of a virus to trigger the body's immune response.

Vaccine: A product that helps the body's immune system prepare to fight off future infections.

Should my family and caregivers get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes. Getting the vaccine lowers their risk of getting COVID-19 or getting as sick from it. This helps protect you, too.

How else can I prevent COVID-19?

You can also help prevent getting and spreading COVID-19 by washing your hands often, avoiding touching your face, keeping surfaces you touch often clean, wearing a well-fitting mask in public, avoiding crowded and poorly ventilated spaces, covering your mouth and nose if you cough or sneeze, staying away from people who are sick, and staying home if you feel sick.

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