



COVID-19 Vaccine Employee Forums

Week of August 9, 2021

Thank you to all of the St. Joseph's Health employees who attended forums to ask questions about the COVID-19 vaccine. We have compiled your questions below to provide you with responses from our administrative and clinical leaders.

About the COVID-19 Vaccine

Q: What is in the vaccine?

A: Both the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna are mRNA vaccines, which teach our cells how to make a protein that triggers an immune response inside our bodies. The benefit of mRNA vaccines, like all vaccines, is those vaccinated gain protection without ever having to risk the serious consequences of getting sick with COVID-19. mRNA vaccines do not use the live virus that causes COVID-19.

Q: Will the vaccine change our DNA?

A: No. COVID-19 vaccines do not change or interact with your DNA in any way. Both mRNA and viral vector COVID-19 vaccines deliver instructions (genetic material) to our cells to start building protection against the virus that causes COVID-19. However, the material never enters the nucleus of the cell, which is where our DNA is kept.

Q: What is the recommended vaccine?

A: All currently authorized and recommended COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not recommend one vaccine over another. The most important decision is to get a COVID-19 vaccination as soon as possible. St. Joseph's Health is offering the Pfizer Bio-N-Tech vaccine, with Johnson & Johnson available upon request.

Q: How long will the vaccine protect me?

A: We don't know how long protection lasts for those who are vaccinated. What we do know is that the COVID-19 virus can cause serious illness. If you get COVID-19, you also risk giving it to loved ones who may get very sick. Getting a COVID-19 vaccine is a safer choice.

Experts are working to learn more about both natural immunity and vaccine-induced immunity. CDC will keep the public informed as new evidence becomes available.

Q: Has there been any deaths associated with the COVID vaccine?

A: Serious side effects that could cause a long-term health problem are extremely unlikely following any vaccination, including COVID-19 vaccination. Vaccine monitoring has historically shown that side effects generally happen within six weeks of receiving a vaccine dose. For this reason, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) required each of the authorized COVID-19 vaccines to be studied for at least two months (eight weeks) after the final dose. Millions of people have received COVID-19 vaccines, and no long-term side effects have been detected.

CDC continues to closely monitor the safety of COVID-19 vaccines. If scientists find a connection between a safety issue and a vaccine, the FDA and the vaccine manufacturer will work toward an appropriate solution to address the specific safety concern (for example, a problem with a specific lot, a manufacturing issue, or the vaccine itself).

Q: Will I get COVID if I get the vaccine?

A: The vaccine cannot transmit COVID to your body. COVID infections have occurred in a small proportion of people who are fully vaccinated. When these “breakthrough” infections occur among vaccinated people, they tend to be mild.

Q: What will happen if I take the vaccine, but I’ve already had COVID?

A: All individuals age 12 and older should get a COVID-19 vaccine, regardless of whether you already had COVID-19. That’s because experts do not yet know how long you are protected from contracting the virus again after recovering from COVID-19. Studies have shown that vaccination provides a strong boost in protection in people who have recovered from COVID-19.

Q: How often will I have to get a booster shot?

A: The need for and timing of COVID-19 booster doses have not been established. Initial booster doses are recommended for immunocompromised individuals. Check with your physician for guidance. This guidance may be updated as more information becomes available.

Q: When will the booster be available at St. Joseph’s?

A: St. Joseph’s is working on a process to administer booster shots to immunocompromised employees, as outlined by the CDC. We expect to begin on Monday, August 30th. Please check Inside or SJHAlert for regular updates and information.

Q: If the vaccine is not fully approved by the FDA, why should I get vaccinated?

A: The FDA may issue an Emergency Use Authorization when certain criteria are met, as is the case with the COVID-19 vaccines. In addition, the FDA decision is based on the totality of scientific evidence available showing that the product may be effective to prevent COVID-19

during the COVID-19 pandemic and that the known and potential benefits of the product outweigh the known and potential risks of the product.

Q: Do those that receive the vaccine have antibodies? How long do they last?

A: Most people develop an antibody response, which cannot always be measured.

Possible Side Effects

Q: Will I get sick from the COVID vaccine? If I'm a diabetic, is it possible that I might die from the COVID-19 vaccine? If I take the COVID-19 vaccine, will I die within 2 years?

A: COVID-19 vaccination will help protect you from getting seriously ill from the COVID-19 virus. You may have some side effects, which are normal signs that your body is building protection. These side effects may affect your ability to do daily activities, but they should go away in a few days. Some people have no side effects.

Serious side effects that could cause a long-term health problem are extremely unlikely following any vaccination, including the COVID-19 vaccine. Vaccine monitoring has historically shown that side effects generally happen within six weeks of receiving a vaccine dose. For this reason, the FDA required each of the authorized COVID-19 vaccines to be studied for at least two months (eight weeks) after the final dose.

Common side effects may include:

- Swelling, redness, and pain at injection site
- Fever
- Headache
- Tiredness
- Muscle pain
- Chills
- Nausea

Adults of any age with certain underlying medical conditions are at increased risk for severe illness from the virus that causes COVID-19. COVID-19 vaccines are recommended for and can be administered to most people with underlying medical conditions. If you have an underlying condition, please check with your healthcare provider.

Q: Will I get a blood clot from the vaccine?

A: After receiving the J&J/Janssen COVID-19 Vaccine, there is risk for a rare but serious adverse event—blood clots with low platelets (thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome, or TTS). Women younger than 50 years old should especially be aware of their increased risk for this rare adverse event. There are other COVID-19 vaccines available (Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna) for which this risk has not been seen.

This adverse event is rare, occurring at a rate of about 7 per 1 million vaccinated women between 18 and 49 years old. For women 50 years and older and men of all ages, this adverse event is even more rare.

Exemptions

Q: Who is on the employee exemption panels? How will the panel evaluate exemption requests?

A: Both the religious and medical exemption panels are comprised of administrative and clinical leaders. They include physicians, in addition to representatives from Human Resources, Legal and Pastoral Care. Exemptions will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Should you wish to appeal an exemption decision, please submit your request to vacexemptrequest@sjhmc.org for further consideration. Individual panelists do not have the authority to override a decision.

Medical Panel Members Include:

Dr. Roger Kierce, Chairman of OB/GYN

Dr. Roberto Solis, Chief of Pulmonology

Ebony Riley, Associate Counsel/Todd Brower, Senior Vice President and General Counsel

Barbara Spoust, Manager, Employee Health

Lorei Cwirko, Director of Benefits

Linette Santos, Director of Employee Relations

Religious Panel Members Include:

Sr. Pat Mennor, Vice President of Mission/Deacon Larry Duffy, Director of Pastoral Care

Ebony Riley, Associate Counsel/Todd Brower, Senior Vice President and General Counsel

Barbara Spoust, Manager, Employee Health

Lorei Cwirko, Director of Benefits

Linette Santos, Director of Employee Relations

Q: Have other employees submitted forms for medical and religious exemption? What is the response time to receive an answer?

A: Employees with a religious or medical concern are submitting exemptions. You should expect to receive a response within 5-7 business days of your submission.

Q: Are pregnant employees going to be exempt from being mandated to take the COVID-19 vaccine?

A: The vaccine is required for all employees. The CDC has released new data on the safety of the COVID-19 vaccines in pregnant women and is recommending that all people 12 years of age and older get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Q: For those that choose not to be vaccinated, they must complete a Religious or Medical Exemption form and it be approved. Can employees simply be willing to comply with weekly testing?

A: If an employee is not vaccinated by September 7, 2021, they will need to have an approved religious or medical exemption in order to comply with weekly testing.

Human Resources

Q: What happens if I do not receive the COVID-19 vaccine before September 7, 2021?

A: Discussions regarding non-compliance are underway, with a final determination closer to the September 7th deadline. Please note that COVID vaccination is required for all St. Joseph's Health employees to provide the safest care for our patients.

Q: If an employee has a side effect from taking the vaccine, will St. Joseph's assume liability if something happens to the employee?

A: In the event an employee has a side effect from taking the vaccine, St. Joseph's health professionals are available to provide medical assistance and care. Moreover, if the employee experiences a severe reaction to the vaccine, causing serious illness or injury, the employee can file a workers compensation claim.

Q: For per-diem staff that may only be scheduled to work 1 or 2 weekend days a month, do they still get tested weekly, or just within a certain number of days of scheduled work day?

A: Per diem employees may plan their testing in accordance with their work schedule; testing must take place within the same week they are reporting to work. If per diem employees received a test at another healthcare organization, they may submit proof of a negative COVID-19 test to ehdocs@sjhmc.org.

General

Q: COVID 19 vaccination was given here at St. Joseph's but was not recorded in the State records. Several in medical records are having the same issue. Could this be an IT issue?

A: St. Joseph's has an automated interface to the New Jersey Immunization Information System (NJIIIS). When you receive a vaccine at St. Joseph's, that data is automatically sent to the state database. We then receive a regular report of any records that fail to enter the database and have a process to remediate them. That said, there are a number of potential reasons for record mismatches, including medical record duplicates and incorrect record merging at the state level. Each case must be reviewed separately given the uniqueness of each issue. If you are having a problem accessing your information, please email marreroj@sjhmc.org indicating your issue and contact information so that we can follow up.

Q: Why did St. Joseph's change the vaccination deadline to September 7, 2021?

A: Governor Phil Murphy announced that all healthcare workers in New Jersey must receive the COVID-19 vaccine no later than Tuesday, September 7, 2021. The announcement came just days after we had provided the previous deadline for St. Joseph’s employees.

While the governor's timeline for vaccination is earlier than what St. Joseph's had previously outlined, we do believe that the vaccine mandate – a direct response to an increase in hospitalizations across the region and the state – ensures the highest levels of safety for our patients.

Q: I am of childbearing age. I have concerns about receiving the vaccine and the impact on fertility.

A: COVID-19 vaccination is recommended for all people 12 years and older, including people who are pregnant, breastfeeding, trying to get pregnant now, or might become pregnant in the future. Evidence about the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccination during pregnancy has been growing. Data show that the benefits of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine outweigh any known or potential risks of vaccination during pregnancy.

There is currently no evidence that COVID-19 vaccination causes any problems with pregnancy, including the development of the placenta. In addition, there is no evidence that female or male fertility problems are a side effect of any vaccine, including COVID-19 vaccines.

Testing

Q: If I’m exempt from the COVID-19 vaccination, how often do I need to get tested?

A: You will need to comply with weekly testing at a St. Joseph’s Health testing location.

Q: Where do I go for the weekly testing?

A: Testing is available Monday through Friday at St. Joseph’s Health. Please bring your St. Joseph’s Health Identification badge. The schedule is included below for your convenience.

Paterson – 11 Getty Avenue

Monday – Friday, 7:15 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Wayne – 224 Hamburg Turnpike

Monday – Friday

7:30 a.m. to 3:15 p.m.

Q: Is there a cost for the weekly testing?

A: There is no cost for employees to receive weekly testing. However, testing must take place at St. Joseph’s Health.

Q: Why isn’t weekly testing an option for people regardless if someone applies for an exemption?

A: We do believe that vaccination – a direct response to an increase in hospitalizations across the region and the state – ensures the highest levels of safety for our patients.

About the COVID-19 Virus

Q: What are the most common symptoms of COVID-19?

A: People with COVID-19 have had a wide range of symptoms reported – ranging from mild symptoms to severe illness. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus.

Anyone can have mild to severe symptoms, which may include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea