

# Frequently Asked Questions for COVID-19 Vaccine

Informational Handout for residents of  
correctional facilities

Prepared by: Westside Justice Center

In collaboration with: Chicago Community  
Bond Fund, Equip for Equality, First Defense  
Legal Aid, Teamwork Englewood, Warehouse  
Workers for Justice, Uptown People's Law  
Center

**Information for Illinois Department of Corrections Prisoners  
Frequently Asked Questions about the COVID-19 Vaccines:**

**What is a vaccine?**

Vaccines teach the immune system how to recognize and fight off the viruses which can prevent vaccinated people from getting sick. Vaccines are not used to treat people who are currently infected with COVID-19.

**How does the vaccine work?**

Dr. Kizzmekia "Kizzy" Shanta Corbett is a Black woman who is a viral immunologist at the Vaccine Research Center at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health. She helped create one of the COVID-19 vaccines. She said, "The vaccine teaches the body how to fend off a virus, because it teaches the body how to look for the virus by basically just showing the body the spike protein of the virus. The body then says 'Oh, we've seen this protein before. Let's go fight against it.' That's how it works."

**How many COVID-19 vaccines are there?**

There are currently two vaccines available in the United States – one made by Pfizer and one made by Moderna.

**Are the vaccines effective?**

Both of the vaccines are 95% effective at preventing illness due to COVID-19.

**Are the vaccines safe?**

Both vaccines were found to be safe and effective in tens of thousands of adults, (including Black and Latinx people). The vaccines have now been administered to millions of people and have a strong record of safety.

**Does the vaccine prevent COVID-19 if I have not had it?**

The vaccine prevents 95% (not 100%) of COVID-19 cases.

**Should I worry that the vaccine was made so quickly?**

Both vaccines were reviewed faster than normal, but this is because so many people are getting sick and dying of COVID-19 that it is considered an international emergency. They have gone through all of the same steps required of any vaccine before being approved for use. Both vaccines have been authorized by the FDA (Food & Drug Administration).

**Is COVID in the vaccine?**

No, it is not. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines both use "messenger RNA" (also called mRNA) to teach the cells in your body to recognize the outside part of the virus that causes COVID-19. That way, if you are exposed to the virus, your immune system will stop it from making you sick.

**Does it matter if both doses are the same vaccine?**

Yes, it matters. The research shows receiving the same vaccine is most effective. Whatever brand your first dose is, your second dose should be the same.

**Will I get COVID from taking the vaccine?**

Because of how the vaccine works, it is impossible to get COVID-19 from the vaccine. However, even if you have been vaccinated, if you have a cough, fever, or other symptoms, then there is a chance you could have COVID-19, and you should ask to speak to medical staff right away.

**What are the side effects from the first and/or second dose of the vaccine?**

The most common side effects of the vaccine are arm soreness, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, joint pain, and fever. These side effects are more common after the second dose of the vaccine and – if they occur – typically resolve within 2 days. These symptoms are normal, and are a sign that your body is building protection against the virus that causes COVID-19.

**How many people have had a severe reaction to the vaccine?**

Among the millions of people who have now received one of the vaccines, a very small number of people have experienced severe allergic reactions. If you have ever had a severe allergic reaction to a vaccine or other substance in the past, you should discuss this with the health care professionals giving you the vaccine.

**Is it better to get the vaccine that offers two doses or the one dose vaccine?**

As of now, both of the approved vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) are two doses.

**The COVID-19 vaccine is an mRNA vaccine. Does that mean it changes your DNA (also called your genetic code)?**

The COVID-19 vaccine does not change your DNA. mRNA is not the same as DNA, and it cannot combine with your DNA to change your genetic code.

**For individuals with underlying medical conditions, is it safe to take the vaccine?**

Yes. It is safe for people with underlying medical conditions. There are very few medical reasons not to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

**Do you still need to wear a mask after taking the vaccine? Why?**

Yes. Unfortunately, even people who have had the COVID-19 vaccine may be able to get infected, and although the vaccine protects them from getting seriously sick, they may still spread COVID-19 to others. (We do not know how common this is yet.) Until the majority of people have been vaccinated against COVID-19, everyone needs to continue wearing masks, practicing physical distancing, and frequently washing their hands.

**What are the benefits of taking the vaccine?**

The more people are vaccinated inside and outside of prison, the sooner things will begin to return to normal. Also, when you get the vaccine, you protect other people around you by making it less likely for them to get COVID-19.

**Is IDOC going to make me take the vaccine?**

No, there is no mandatory vaccination requirement from either the state or federal government. IDOC is encouraging all staff and incarcerated people to voluntarily take the vaccine.

**Will incarcerated individuals be punished for not taking the vaccine?**

No one will be punished for not taking the vaccine.

**Many of the guards will not take the vaccine, why should prisoners take the vaccine?**

There are many reasons people are afraid to get the vaccine. These include a lack of knowledge about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine, a lack of understanding about COVID-19 itself, a long history of mistrust of the medical system, and more. We encourage you to empower yourself to learn as much as you can about the COVID-19 vaccine. It is important that you make your own decision about getting the vaccine regardless of what other people are doing.

**If I take the first dose while incarcerated and then I am released, how will I get the second dose? Do I have to stay locked up to get the second dose?**

No, if you receive the first dose while incarcerated, you will not have to stay incarcerated to get the second dose. IDOC is working to partner with healthcare facilities to assist people being released to get the second dose of the same vaccine.

**If I already had COVID-19, do I need to get the COVID-19 vaccine?**

COVID-19 vaccination should be offered to you even if you already had COVID-19. The COVID-19 vaccination has been shown to be safe in those who have already had COVID-19. Right now, research shows that reinfection with the virus that causes COVID-19 is incredibly rare in the 90 days after you first get sick with COVID-19. However, infection during or after that 90 day period is still possible. Therefore, the vaccine should be offered to everyone.

**I currently have COVID, should I get the vaccine?**

You should not get the vaccine if you are currently sick with COVID-19.

**How is IDOC getting information to prisoners?**

Using ambassadors in the units, putting information on tablets, the television channels, and the boards, as well as having healthcare professionals answer questions and share as much information as possible.

**Will IDOC prioritize at risk populations?**

IDOC will prioritize at risk populations. Guards and prisoners will be vaccinated at the same time at each facility.

**How will IDOC know who wants to take the vaccine?**

IDOC is conducting a survey in the next week for everyone inside to choose if they want to take the vaccine or not. This will assist them with knowing how many doses of the vaccine need to be ordered.

**When will prisoners begin to receive the vaccine?**

IDOC is working with Illinois Department of Public Health and Illinois Emergency Management Agency to develop a vaccination schedule.

**How will IDOC monitor people who have taken the vaccine and have an allergic reaction? What kind of care will they receive?**

Each person that receives the vaccine will be monitored for 30 minutes after receiving the shot. If anyone has a reaction, at any time after receiving the vaccine, medical staff will be available to assist to and ensure that anyone needing medical attention will receive it.

**Who will administer the vaccine to the prisoners?**

Healthcare professionals who may be employed by the Illinois National Guard, local health departments or private agencies.

**Will individuals have increased access to mail services and phone calls in order to help them decide and learn about the vaccine?**

The Department will provide information via videos, mailings and flyers from various advocacy groups, court monitors and the Department's own healthcare providers.

**Why isn't release being prioritized as a public health response when proximity, as IDPH has repeatedly reminded us, is a crucial factor in the vectoring and one that cannot be in controlled in prison or jail, given population density?**

Since the beginning of the pandemic the Department has worked to release people using the legal tools at its disposal e.g. EDSC, ED for those individuals who qualify, and medical furloughs. The Department will continue to utilize these tools throughout the pandemic.

**I still have more questions, what should I do?**

Ask your friends or family to get more information about the COVID-19 vaccines at these trusted sites:

<https://coronavirus.illinois.gov/s/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html>

**References**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: COVID-19 Vaccination

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid19/info-by-product/clinical-considerations.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html>

