

What doctors want patients to know about COVID-19 vaccination

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Editor's note, April 2021: For the latest, find out [what to tell your patients about new CDC advice on mask-wearing](#).

After a disappointingly slow rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S., Americans are growing increasingly eager to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. While [struggles remain](#) and states continue to navigate distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, physicians want patients to know what to expect when it is their turn.

“Vaccines don't save lives, vaccinations do ... We've got to get these vaccines into arms,” said [Sandra Fryhofer, MD](#), an Atlanta general internist who serves as the AMA's liaison to the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) and a member of ACIP's COVID-19 Vaccine Work Group.

So far, we have “lucked out with these mRNA vaccines,” said Dr. Fryhofer, a member of the [AMA Board of Trustees](#). People will want to get vaccinated when it's their turn because “it is an opportunity of a lifetime and it can save your life.”

Life will remain the same for now

“Even after we get vaccinated, we still have to wear our masks and you still have to physically distance,” said Dr. Fryhofer, acknowledging that “it is frustrating that for at least the short term we're not going to be able to change our behaviors.”

“We've got to do what's safe for everybody, but as soon as we get everyone vaccinated, we'll be closer to getting back to life as normal,” she said.

Learn about [eight coronavirus tips that doctors want patients to follow](#).

Wide distribution will take time

As a country, "we are not the only ones that need vaccines," said Dr. Fryhofer, adding that while an additional 100 million doses were purchased from both Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech, "they're not all going to be available for us immediately."

"Some of those additional doses will not be available until July because everyone in the world is wanting these vaccines," she added, noting that "there are more vaccines in the pipeline."

Learn from AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD, about the need for a [unified and comprehensive pandemic response](#).

Each vaccine requires two doses

"The most important thing is whichever vaccine you get for the first dose you have to get for the second dose," said Dr. Fryhofer, adding that "there's no mixing and matching—you want to get the full dose."

"Some news reports have suggested getting half doses, but the FDA is very clear that we need to do what was studied and both vaccines are fabulous—they're both over 90% effective," she said. "The second dose is not a booster. It's a second dose in a series."

Discover why [data doesn't back altering doses for COVID-19 vaccination](#).

Expect potential side effects

Common side effects from either COVID-19 vaccine include pain, redness and swelling of the arm that received the shot as well as chills, tiredness, fever and a headache.

After receiving the first dose of the vaccine, "I've still got a big red spot," said Dr. Fryhofer. "It's like my badge of honor. I am so honored to be a health care provider and I'm glad I

could be vaccinated so I can be protected as I take care of my patients.”

“I cannot wait to get my next vaccine dose even though I know I probably won’t feel well the day or two after, but you have to think about the long term,” she said.

Additionally, “the new recommendation from the CDC is if you’re allergic to PEG—which is polyethylene glycol and is an ingredient in both vaccines—you should not get an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine,” said Dr. Fryhofer. While “the benefits of vaccination certainly outweigh the risk, you do have to be prepared.”

Discover [eight things physicians and patients need to know about the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine](#).

There may be protection against COVID-19 variants

“When the Moderna people were talking about their vaccine at one of our ACIP meetings, they said they had been testing some of the serum from their animal trials on the COVID-19 variant,” said Dr. Fryhofer, adding that it appears “media reports suggest that Pfizer has done the same thing.”

“So far it seems reassuring, but you don’t really know until they get it tested,” she said. However, “mRNA vaccines do focus on the entire spike protein and that is what induces an immune response.”

Find out [why some patients may vacillate on COVID-19 vaccination](#).

It's not 100% protection

Vaccination with two doses of the same mRNA vaccines is “94% to 95% effective,” said Dr. Fryhofer. “It’s no guarantee, but at least it gives me a head start.”

Additionally, “we don’t know yet if these mRNA vaccines prevent asymptomatic transmission,” she said. Which means, “you could be part of that 5% that are not protected,

so that's why we still have to keep wearing masks.

"Right now, these vaccines are your very best bet to stay well, stay healthy and stay alive," Dr. Fryhofer added.

Check state health department website

Patients should also "go on their department of health website and take a look at the forms that are being offered and read them," said Dr. Fryhofer. It is better to do so sooner rather than later.

Watch [part one](#) and [part two](#) of this "AMA COVID-19 Update" where Dr. Fryhofer and other experts discuss Pfizer vaccine use and allocation.

The AMA has developed frequently-asked-questions documents on COVID-19 vaccination covering safety, allocation and distribution, administration and more. There are two FAQs, one designed to answer [patients' questions](#), and another to address [physicians' COVID-19 vaccine questions](#).

Additionally, the AMA has created two explainer documents for patients covering [COVID-19 transmission](#) and [wearing face masks](#).