

ORGAN TRANSPLANT PATIENTS & THE COVID-19 VACCINE: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SHOULD I GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

The UAB Medicine transplant team and major transplant organizations around the world recommend that all organ transplant recipients get the vaccine as soon as it is available to them. We also advise that you talk with your transplant team if you have questions about your specific situation. Please let your coordinator know if you want to have that kind of discussion.

DOES THE VACCINE WORK?

The benefit of the vaccine in preventing COVID-19 infection in organ transplant recipients is significant. Some recipients who are vaccinated may still get COVID-19, but those who do are less likely to be severely ill or require hospitalization or intensive care, and they have a lower risk of death. Currently, antibody levels are not helpful in predicting the risk of getting COVID-19 for organ transplant recipients. Also, there are no other tests available that help us predict which patients will get infected. Therefore, even after vaccination, it still is very important to wear a mask and practice frequent hand hygiene. Other measures that have been found to be very effective are:

- Asking your loved ones, close friends, and colleagues to get vaccinated to protect you
- Avoiding or minimizing time indoors when around unvaccinated people and outdoors if in large crowds

WHEN SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE?

To protect your health, we strongly recommend that you receive a vaccine as soon as possible, based on the guidance below:

Before transplant

When possible, the vaccine should be administered in the pre-transplant setting, with the final dose at least 1-2 weeks prior to transplant. It is not necessary to put your transplant status on hold while waiting for vaccination. If your transplant occurs between your two vaccine doses, your transplant physician will decide on the timing of the second dose.

After transplant

Based on expert opinions and experience with other vaccines, the earliest you should get the vaccine is one month after your transplant. It may be necessary to wait 3-6 months after your transplant, depending on your individual situation and the type of organ you received. Your transplant team will review your case and advise you accordingly. Please also reach out to your transplant team to discuss this further. If your transplant occurs between your two vaccine doses, your transplant physician will decide on the timing of the second dose.

DO I NEED A THIRD DOSE OF THE VACCINE?

- For patients who have been fully vaccinated with the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine, you are eligible under the latest FDA rules to receive a third dose. You should wait at least 28 days after getting your second dose, and you should try to get the same brand of vaccine as what you received originally. For example, if you received two doses of the Moderna vaccine, ideally you should stay with Moderna for the third dose. If the same vaccine brand is unavailable to you, you can have the other mRNA vaccine (i.e. if Moderna is not available, then go with the Pfizer brand for your third dose, and vice versa).
- For patients who received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, currently there is no FDA or CDC recommendation for a third dose, but those agencies are actively working to provide guidance on this issue.
- Neither the FDA nor the CDC currently is recommending third doses or booster shots for other population groups, so the third-dose recommendation does not apply to your loved ones unless they are immunosuppressed or meet other specific criteria.

To get a third dose of the vaccine, you can go to your local county health department or pharmacy. You will be asked to complete a form attesting to your eligibility, and when asked about the qualifying condition, choose "solid organ transplant".

In all cases, you should continue to mask and practice social distancing and proper hand hygiene. Also, you should ask your family and friends you spend time with to get vaccinated to help keep you safe, as the COVID-19 vaccines are effective in most cases, even against the Delta variant.

CAN I STOP WEARING A MASK AFTER VACCINATION?

We recommend continuing to wear a mask after vaccination, regardless of state or local requirements. The effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines in transplant recipients can be lower than in the general population, so we urge you to continue practicing infection control measures such as masking, social distancing, and proper hand hygiene. As stated above, other measures that have been found to be very effective are:

- Asking your loved ones, close friends, and colleagues to get vaccinated to protect you
- Avoiding or minimizing time indoors when around unvaccinated people and outdoors when in large crowds

HOW AND WHERE SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE? IS IT OKAY TO GET IT LOCALLY, OR DO I NEED TO COME TO UAB?

You do not need to come to UAB to receive the vaccine. We recommend getting the COVID-19 vaccine from any health care provider or pharmacy that is offering it to you.

IF I ALREADY HAD COVID-19, DO I STILL NEED THE VACCINE? IF SO, HOW LONG SHOULD I WAIT AFTER I HAD THE VIRUS?

If you already had COVID-19, we recommend waiting at least 90 days from diagnosis and symptom recovery before getting the COVID-19 vaccine. If you were treated with convalescent plasma or monoclonal antibodies, you should wait 90 days after the date of infusion to receive your COVID-19 vaccine.

I AM CONSIDERING STARTING A FAMILY IN THE FUTURE. CAN THE VACCINE CAUSE PROBLEMS WITH MY PREGNANCY OR BABY?

Several national organizations of physicians who care for pregnant women recommend the vaccine for women who are planning a pregnancy, pregnant, or breastfeeding. These groups include the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, and the American Society for Reproductive Medicine. Vaccination in pregnancy can have a beneficial effect and provide protection for mother and baby. The available research does not indicate that the vaccine can cause problems in pregnancy or with your baby. We advise you to talk with your care team if you have questions.

CAN THE VACCINE CAUSE REJECTION OF MY NEW ORGAN?

There are no data that indicate an increased risk of rejection with the COVID 19 vaccine. The benefits far outweigh any risk. In patients undergoing active treatment for organ rejection, vaccination can be postponed for one month. We recommend that you avoid getting other vaccines within two weeks of getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

I AM CONSIDERING DONATING A KIDNEY. SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE BEFORE I DONATE, AND IS IT REQUIRED?

We strongly recommend that you receive the COVID-19 vaccine to protect your health and the health of your loved ones. There is no current requirement to be vaccinated prior to donating a kidney. Getting the COVID-19 vaccine before your donor evaluation or kidney donation should not interfere with the donation process, and living kidney donors who already donated can get the vaccine after kidney donation.

SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE IF I AM A CAREGIVER?

Household members and immediate caregivers for the transplant recipient should be vaccinated. We strongly recommended that patients and caregivers also continue practicing infection control measures such as masking, social distancing, and proper hand hygiene – even if you've received the vaccine.

HOW CAN I STAY UPDATED ON THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

Information is changing quickly. Please check for updates at uabmedicine.org/covidvaccine.