COVID-19 VACCINATION

Information for people affected by cancer

With Australia's COVID-19 vaccination program now underway, there are many questions being raised by patients, families and carers affected by cancer. This fact sheet addresses some of these questions about the COVID-19 vaccines.

Vaccine safety

Both of the available COVID-19 vaccines – Pfizer and AstraZeneca – are safe and recommended for all Australian adults, including patients with cancer and those in remission.

Both have passed Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration's rigorous assessment and approval processes that assess vaccine safety, quality and effectiveness.

They do not contain the live virus that causes COVID-19 and therefore there is no risk of catching the infection from the vaccines.

Recommendation for cancer patients

The COVID-19 vaccines have not been studied specifically in patients with cancer. How your immune system responds may be influenced by your own general health and your cancer treatment.

Some types of cancer and their treatment increase the risk of catching COVID-19 and of poorer impacts to your treatment and recovery. Vaccination against COVID-19 is therefore highly recommended, as long as the person does not have a serious allergy to components of the COVID-19 vaccine.

We know from studies of other vaccines (such as the flu vaccine) in patients with cancer that the level of response or protection from vaccination may be lower compared to people without cancer. So steps that you have taken to reduce your risk of infection, such as physical distancing, hand hygiene and use of masks, remain important even after vaccination. Such measures will also help prevent infection, while vaccination is designed to reduce the impact of COVID-19 should you become infected.

Vaccination and cancer treatment

Based on how the vaccines work, we do not anticipate that the vaccines will reduce the effectiveness of cancer treatments.

Your doctor will be able to discuss timing of vaccination with you, as with some therapies it may be preferable to avoid vaccination during certain treatment periods. This is to avoid confusion around possible side effects and whether they have been caused by the vaccine or your cancer treatment.

Who should not use the vaccine?

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) recommends that COVID-19 vaccination be deferred for people who have a history of two rare conditions - cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) or heparin induced thrombocytopenia (a specific diagnosis separate from common causes of thrombocytopenia, or low platelets). ATAGI advises that the risk of developing blood clots is not increased with vaccination in patients with a history of blood clots or risk factors for blood clots.

Patients with blood cancer

People with a blood cancer diagnosis are at increased risk of complications from COVID-19 infection.

While the vaccines that are approved in Australia are safe, guaranteed protection against COVID-19 cannot be assumed, so measures, such as wearing a mask, hand hygiene, and social distancing, remain important even after vaccination.

Stem cell transplants

For patients who have had an autologous or allogenic stem cell transplant, vaccination is recommended at least three months after your transplant.

Side effects

Common side effects from the vaccine have typically been mild and short-lived – like pain or redness at the injection site. Up to half of all vaccinated people will experience some general side effects such as tiredness, headache and muscle aches and pain. A small number of people may develop fever. You should seek medical advice if, for example, you develop a fever, accompanied by shivering and sweating.

Severe reactions to vaccinations

If you have had a severe allergic reaction or anaphylaxis to a vaccine in the past, you should discuss with your doctor or specialist the type of reaction you had to the particular vaccine. You can be referred to specialised vaccination clinics for further assessment and if suitable, for vaccination under close supervision.

COVID-19 and flu vaccines

The current recommended gap between a dose of seasonal flu vaccine and a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine is at least 14 days.

Booking your vaccine

The Australian Government's **Vaccine Eligibility Checker** can be used to find out which phase of the rollout you are in, or you can contact your GP. If you are eligible, you will be able to view your nearest vaccination clinics and book an appointment online or via phone. If you are not yet eligible, you will be able to register your interest so that you can be notified when you are able to book. To check your eligibility and book, go to: **covid-vaccine.healthdirect.gov.au/eligibility**

Further information

- Australian Department of Health **COVID-19 vaccine webpage**
- Cancer Australia's **Frequently Asked Questions** about the COVID-19 vaccines
- **National Coronavirus Helpline**: **1800 020 080**. Ask for an interpreter if needed.
- Contact **Cancer Council** on **13 11 20** for information and support services to anyone affected by cancer - whether it's patients, carers, family, friends, workplaces or health professionals. Available from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. If you need a translator to use this service, call **13 14 50**
- Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre patients on active treatment can contact their **Peter Mac Patient Navigator** Monday to Friday, 8.00am - 4.30pm or call the main reception on **(03) 8559 5000**

Patients on active treatment at other health care facilities should contact their treating team.
*In the event of an emergency, please dial **000** for an ambulance.*