Correctional facilities (e.g., jails, prisons) have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Safe and effective vaccines are available for people who are incarcerated.

Getting vaccinated against COVID-19 is one of the most important steps you can take to protect yourself. With more people vaccinated, there is less COVID-19 disease. COVID-19 vaccine is free for everyone.

It is normal to have concerns and questions about a new vaccine, especially for those that face barriers to accessing health care or who are hesitant to trust the health care system due to medical trauma, abuse, or equity concerns – both historical and present. Here are the facts on COVID-19 vaccines.

**COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective**

COVID-19 vaccines are made like other vaccines and no safety steps were skipped in the process. All COVID-19 vaccines were studied with tens of thousands of volunteers of different ages, races, ethnicities, and medical histories to make sure they are safe and work. More than 500 million COVID-19 vaccine doses have been given safely to people in the United States, and all vaccines continue to be monitored to see how they are working and for side effects.

COVID-19 vaccines were made as fast as they were because scientists were able to use research done over the last 20 years to get started. Many steps in the development process were completed quickly and successfully due to significant federal government funding that prioritized the vaccine development. For example, federal funding allowed medical researchers to quickly transition from vaccine development and testing to being able to make large amounts of vaccine. This process ensured that the vaccines were ready to distribute as soon as they were shown to be safe and effective.

Vaccine researchers also collected the necessary data to show the vaccines work and are safe for people from many different communities and backgrounds. In addition, COVID-19 vaccines are recommended for people who are pregnant or breastfeeding, or who recently had a baby. Evidence continues to build showing it is safe to get vaccinated while pregnant or breastfeeding. There is no evidence that any of the COVID-19 vaccines affect future fertility, so people who want to have a baby someday should get vaccinated as well.

Three vaccines are available in the United States: Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson. The COVID-19 vaccines offered in correctional facilities are the same vaccines given in the community. Pfizer and Moderna are recommended over Johnson & Johnson, because of the risk of a rare but serious side effect from the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine may still be an option for some people. You can ask what vaccine your facility is using.
COVID-19 vaccines protect against COVID-19 disease.

Like other vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines help people build up protection against the virus without them having to get the virus. COVID-19 vaccines can prevent infection and are also very effective at protecting vaccinated people against serious illness, hospitalization, or death if they do get infected. New COVID-19 variants, such as Omicron, have emerged. Experts believe the COVID-19 vaccine still offers protection against the Omicron variant.

Two of the COVID-19 vaccines, Pfizer and Moderna, are called mRNA vaccines. The mRNA (messenger RNA) in these vaccines is genetic material that gives the body instructions to recognize and fight the virus that causes COVID-19 disease. The mRNA COVID-19 vaccines do not and cannot change your genetic makeup (DNA). Another COVID-19 vaccine, Johnson & Johnson, uses a harmless strain of a common cold virus to help the body recognize and fight the virus that causes COVID-19 disease. COVID-19 vaccines cannot infect a person with COVID-19.

What if I already had COVID-19?

Even if someone has already had COVID-19, they can get sick again. People who have had COVID-19 should get vaccinated, because COVID-19 vaccines will boost their protection.

Vaccine doses

Primary vaccine series

Most COVID-19 vaccines require two doses to work best. This is called a primary vaccine series. Two doses are needed for the mRNA Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines. The time between doses depends on which vaccine someone is getting. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is a one-dose vaccine.

Every person who gets vaccinated will receive a vaccine card after their first dose that says what vaccine product they got and when they got it. The medical provider who gave the vaccine will enter this information into Minnesota’s immunization information system. This information helps the next medical provider know what vaccine was given and when before they give someone any additional vaccine. Information entered in the immunization system is private health data. Only people with authorized access can use this system.

Someone should get vaccinated even if they will be released or moving to another facility before they are due for the next dose of COVID-19 vaccine. Plenty of vaccine is available to correctional facilities and out in the community, so getting the next dose is not going to be a problem. For more information about community vaccine options, go to COVID-19 Vaccinations (mn.gov/vaccine) and click “Find My Vaccine,” or call 1-833-431-2053 to find places with COVID-19 vaccine.

After the primary series of COVID-19 vaccines, it takes about two weeks for the body to build up protection. After those two weeks, a fully vaccinated person has good protection against COVID-19.
Booster doses

A booster dose is given when protection from the original vaccination decreases. The booster dose helps build protection back to a higher level. The initial vaccine series still gives some protection over time, but a booster dose when recommended offers the most protection.

All people ages 12 and older should get a booster dose when recommended. People who got a Johnson & Johnson vaccine should get a booster dose two months after their first dose. People who got Pfizer or Moderna vaccine should get a booster five months after their primary series.

Pfizer is the only booster option for kids ages 12 through 17. People ages 18 and older can get any COVID-19 vaccine for their booster, but they should get Pfizer or Moderna if either of these is available. It is not known yet how often people may need to get booster doses in the future.

People who are moderately or severely immunocompromised

Some people may not have good protection from their primary COVID-19 vaccine series because of a weakened immune system, which may be caused by an illness or related treatment. An extra dose as part of their primary series, and a booster dose, can improve protection for these people.

People that are considered moderately or severely immunocompromised include those:

- Receiving cancer treatment
- Taking medicine that suppresses the immune response
- With advanced HIV infection

If someone has an immunocompromising condition, they should talk to a medical provider about their medical condition and when to get an additional dose and booster dose.

SIDE EFFECTS

Some side effects are common after vaccination. Side effects mean that the body is responding to the vaccine, but it is also OK if someone has no side effects at all. You may have:

- A sore arm
- Muscle aches
- Tiredness
- Headache
- Fever/chills

Serious side effects are rare. Notify medical staff if side effects get worse.