



INFORMATION ON VACCINES AND COVID 19 VACCINATION IN ZIMBABWE

Introduction

The Ministry of Health and Child Care provides lifesaving vaccines to children and adults through its network of health centres, in schools and in different communities. The Ministry aims to reach everyone in the country with vaccines to prevent illness, disability and death due to vaccine preventable diseases. COVID 19 vaccines are being rolled out in Zimbabwe and the rest of the world and below are answers to the commonly asked questions about these and other vaccines to help those who want to make the wise choice to vaccinate themselves and their children. Here we also provide facts for common myths that are circulating about the vaccines.

What is a vaccine?

Vaccines are medical products that are given to people (both children and adults) to protect them against serious and sometimes deadly diseases. These vaccines help to protect us against all vaccine preventable diseases.

How do vaccines work?

Vaccines train your immune system to create antibodies, just as it does when it's exposed to a disease. However, because vaccines contain only killed or weakened forms of germs like viruses or bacteria, they do not cause the disease or put you at risk of its complications.

- Some vaccines require multiple doses, given weeks or months apart.
- This is sometimes needed to allow for the production of long-lived antibodies and development of memory cells.
- In this way, the body is trained to fight the specific disease-causing organism, building up memory against the pathogen so it can fight
- it in the future
- Vaccines reduce risks of getting a disease by working with your body's natural defences to build protection against specific diseases.

What is a COVID-19 vaccine?

It is a vaccine that is intended to provide immunity against COVID-19. Several safe and effective vaccines have now been produced and approved for use and countries have started rolling out COVID 19 vaccination programmes to protect people.

Are vaccines necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

Yes, vaccines are an essential public health measure for the prevention and control of COVID-19 locally and globally. Vaccines have been a major pillar for the control of similar epidemics in the past and will equally be important for COVID 19. The vaccines will complement existing prevention and control measures and not replace them. Zimbabwe together with the rest of the world is rolling out safe and effective COVID 19 vaccines to control and eventually eliminate COVID 19 burden in the country

What types of COVID-19 vaccines are being developed? How would they work?

Scientists are developing many potential vaccines for COVID-19, all designed to teach the body's immune system to safely recognize and block the virus that causes COVID-19. Different types of vaccines include:

- Inactivated or weakened virus vaccines, which use a form of the virus that doesn't cause disease, but still prompts an immune response
- Protein-based vaccines, which a coronavirus protein or protein fragment to safely prompt an immune response
- Viral vector vaccines, which use a virus that has been engineered so it can't cause disease, but produces coronavirus proteins to safely prompt an immune response

RNA and DNA vaccines, a new approach that provides "instructions" for cells to build a protein that safely prompts an immune response

What would be the benefits of getting a COVID 19 vaccine?

- COVID-19 is easily transmitted and can lead to serious illness and death, even for people who are young and healthy.
- Vaccines for COVID-19 will only be approved for use in this country if large, rigorous, and thorough scientific studies show that they safely reduce your risk of getting COVID-19. They would do that by preparing your body's natural defences – the immune system – to recognize and fight off the virus that causes COVID-19.
- Scientists are studying whether people who get vaccinated for COVID-19 would also be less likely to pass the COVID-19 virus on to other people. If that's the case, getting vaccinated could be a powerful way to not only protect yourself, but also your entire community.

Why should I get vaccinated?

Vaccines save lives. Vaccines will help protect you and those around you against vaccine preventable diseases that can cause serious harm or death.

Those who cannot be vaccinated like very young babies, the very ill or those with certain allergies and people with compromised immune systems depend on others being vaccinated to ensure they are also safe from vaccine-preventable diseases.

Without vaccines, we are at high risk of serious illness and disability from diseases like measles, meningitis, pneumonia, tetanus, polio and COVID 19

Who can get vaccinated?

Nearly everyone can get vaccinated. However, because of some medical conditions, some people should not get certain vaccines, or should wait before getting them.

Your health provider will help to decide on which vaccine is recommended or not recommended for your condition

Will there be enough COVID-19 vaccines for everyone? If not, who will get them first?

Currently there is limited supply of COVID-19 vaccines globally due to high demand. This means not everyone in Zimbabwe will be able to get vaccinated right away.

The country will therefore roll out vaccination in phases starting with those at highest risk until all eligible people have been covered. Priority groups in Zimbabwe include health and other frontline workers at highest risk of infection, older adults 60 years and above, and people at high risk of death because of underlying conditions like heart disease and diabetes. Once adequate doses become available, we will encourage all those who qualify to get vaccinated.

Will I be able to access the vaccine for free?

Yes. COVID-19 vaccines will be provided free of to all those who are eligible and want to protect themselves

Will I be forced to take the COVID 19 vaccine?

Every Zimbabwean must lookout for each other. The government however recommends all eligible persons in Zimbabwe to take up COVID 19 vaccination when their turn comes. It is important to note that various institutions, employers and countries may require proof of COVID 19 vaccination upon entry or hiring to protect citizens as the roll out of COVID 19 vaccines continue

What is the benefit of vaccinating a lot of people in a community at risk?

- When a lot of people in a community are vaccinated, it becomes difficult for the disease to circulate because most of the people it encounters are protected and

cannot catch it. The more people who get vaccinated the lesser the risk of getting the disease in a community and this concept is called **herd immunity**. This is the reason why it is important for all eligible people in our communities to be vaccinated against all vaccine preventable diseases.

- Herd immunity also prevents disease outbreaks by making it difficult for the disease to spread since most people will be protected. The disease will become more and more rare, sometimes even disappearing entirely from your area and in the country.
- Herd immunity for COVID 19 can be reached if 60% or more of the population at risk is vaccinated

How quickly can COVID19 vaccine stop the pandemic?

The impact of COVID-19 vaccines on the pandemic will depend on several factors. These include:

- The effectiveness of the vaccines;
- How quickly they are manufactured and delivered for use
- How many people get vaccinated?

Wider availability and uptake of effective COVID 19 vaccines in Zimbabwe is expected to have greatest impact on the pandemic and facilitate early return to normalcy. COVID-19 vaccines are not 100% effective hence you will need to continue to practice all other recommended behaviours even after vaccination

If I get a COVID-19 vaccine, will I still need to take other precautions such as physical distancing, wearing masks and regular handwashing?

Yes. For the time being, we recommend that everyone – including those who have been vaccinated – continue using all available tools to help stop the spread of COVID-19, such as physical distancing, regular handwashing and the proper use of masks. Using all of these tools in combination will provide the best possible protection against getting and spreading COVID-19. This recommendation could change in the future once many people have been vaccinated, and as we learn more about the “real world” protection provided by COVID-19 vaccines.

Will COVID-19 vaccines provide long-term protection?

It's too early to know if COVID-19 vaccines will provide long-term protection. Added research is needed to answer this question. However, it's encouraging that available data suggest that most people who recover from COVID-19 develop an immune response that provides at least some protection against reinfection – although we're still learning how strong this protection is, and how long it lasts.

Will other existing vaccines help protect me from COVID19?

Currently, there is no evidence that any existing vaccines will protect against COVID-19.

Studies are however being carried out on whether some existing vaccines are also effective for COVID-19 prevention.

Are vaccines safe to use?

Yes. Vaccines are generally safe and have been in use for many years in Zimbabwe and the rest of the world

It is a legal requirement that all vaccines and medicines used in our health facilities undergo rigorous safety testing, including all recommended clinical trials before they are approved for use. All vaccines (including COVID 19 vaccines) go through a comprehensive approval process by global and local medical regulators to ensure that they are safe for use in humans.

The Medicines Control Authority of Zimbabwe only registers vaccines that meet quality and safety standards for use in Zimbabwe.

Safety monitoring for vaccines is also an ongoing activity in the national immunisation programme in Zimbabwe

NB: A person is far more likely to be seriously harmed by a disease than by a vaccine.

What steps are taken to ensure the COVID-19 vaccine is safe?

COVID-19 vaccines go through a rigorous, multi-stage testing process, including large trials that involve tens of thousands of people. These trials, which include people at high risk for COVID-19, are specifically designed to identify any common adverse events or other safety concerns.

Once a clinical trial shows that a COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective, a series of independent reviews of the efficacy and safety evidence is required, including regulatory review and approval in the country where the vaccine is manufactured, before WHO considers a vaccine product for prequalification. An external panel of experts convened by WHO analyses the results from clinical trials, along with evidence on the disease, age groups affected, risk factors for disease, and other information. The panel recommends whether and how the vaccines should be used.

What process is followed before a vaccine is given to the public?

Before COVID-19 vaccines can be delivered:

- The vaccines must be proven safe and effective in large clinical trials.
- A series of independent reviews of the efficacy and safety evidence is required.
- The evidence must also be reviewed for the purpose of policy recommendations on how the vaccines should be used.
- An external panel of experts convened by WHO, called the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE), analyses the results from clinical trials.
- The panel then recommends whether and how the vaccines should be used.
- Officials in individual countries decide whether to approve the vaccines for national use and develop policies for how to use the vaccines in their country based on the WHO recommendations.

All COVID 19 vaccines in use have been approved for emergency use by either WHO or other Stringent Regulatory Authorities (SRAs) in manufacturing countries

Who approves COVID 19 vaccines?

In the countries where vaccines are manufactured, national or regional regulators oversee a vaccine's development. This includes approving clinical trials, evaluating their results, and taking decisions on licensing. In deciding, regulators refer to very strict international standards on acceptable ethical clinical practice.

Once a vaccine has been developed, our local regulators and experts decide whether to introduce the vaccine in Zimbabwe and with what conditions.

Are there side effects from vaccines?

Minor reactions can occur after getting a vaccine such as a pain or swelling on injection site or a mild fever and irritability in children. These are usually indications that the vaccine has started to work.

More serious side effects such as shock and persistent fever are possible, but extremely rare and vaccinators are trained to manage these.

It is advised to visit your health facility for advice if you are worried about your condition after vaccination.

What happens if a problem is suspected with a vaccine?

- If a potential problem is reported following vaccination in Zimbabwe, a thorough investigation will take place. Investigations involve a thorough examination of the case in question, including medical assessment by experts. If necessary, detailed studies are conducted.
- During these investigations, it is extremely rare that health problems are found to be caused by the vaccine itself.
- Health events are most often found to be coincidental, i.e. entirely unrelated to vaccination.
- In the rare cases where a genuine adverse reaction is suspected, the vaccine may be suspended and or recalled if necessary to protect the people. Further investigations will take place to determine what exactly caused the event, and corrective measures put in place.

What happens to routine childhood immunisation during COVID 19 vaccination period?

Routine childhood immunisation is an essential health service that should not be disrupted even during the COVID 19 vaccination period. Parents and caregivers of children should continue to bring children to health centres and vaccination points for vaccination and other child health services while practicing COVID 19 prevention behaviours. Talk to your health worker to know if there are any changes in timing of provision of immunisation services at your health centre induced by COVID 19 control measures or restrictions.

Summary of key messages on COVID 19 vaccination in Zimbabwe

- COVID-19 vaccines provide immunity and protect us, and our communities from severe forms of COVID 19 .
- It is important to get the COVID -19 vaccine immediately when your turn comes, so that you can protect yourself, your family, friends and community from the infection.
- The vaccination process in Zimbabwe will be done in phases starting with those at highest risk until all eligible people are covered. Meanwhile we all need to continue using all available tools to help stop the spread of COVID-19, such as handwashing with soap, physical distancing and the use of masks.
- Vaccination will be voluntary and provided free of charge to beneficiaries
- Adequate safety and efficacy tests have been done on COVID 19 vaccines in use in Zimbabwe and necessary regulatory approval has been given.
- Safety monitoring for all COVID-19 vaccines in Zimbabwe will be conducted throughout the vaccination period
- While vaccines are now available for some people in the initial phase, it is critical that all of us continue to follow all the COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviours, to ensure that we stay protected.

Myths and Facts about COVID 19 vaccines

Myth: Vaccines are unsafe and normal safety protocols have been circumvented to fast track their authorisation for use

Fact: The fast development and approval of vaccines is a great human achievement worthy of celebration. This has been possible because we have learnt over many decades how to make and test vaccines and we were able to take those lessons and challenge ourselves to produce a vaccine much quicker. No step in the development, testing or ratification of the COVID-19 vaccines has been skipped. The world was able to develop vaccines fast because scientists and governments around the world collaborated in a manner that has never been achieved before and pooled resources and information to ensure that everyone can contribute to the knowledge.

Myth: The vaccine will change my DNA

Fact: Vaccines work by stimulating the body the same way the virus would if someone was infected. That means when you receive the vaccine the body then recognises that it looks like the coronavirus and then it releases certain chemicals that start a chain reaction to make immune cells that can fight the real virus. The vaccine **does not work on the DNA** of the body. Some people think that because some of the vaccines are made using RNA technology that means the RNA will interact with the DNA. That is not how it works. The technology is simply the way the vaccine is made - not what it will do to the body.

Myth: COVID 19 vaccines contain a form of microchip that will be used to track and control an individual

Fact: There is no vaccine "microchip" and there is no evidence to support claims that such a move is planned. Receiving a vaccine will not allow people to be tracked and personal information would not be entered into a database.

Myth: Big businesses are pushing vaccines to improve profits

Fact: The COVID-19 crisis has caused massive disturbances across the globe and no nation has been spared. A vaccine represents the best hope to save lives and to restore our way of life, many governments have therefore entered into direct talks with vaccine makers to ensure a timely supply of vaccines.

Myth: Government is complicit with big businesses in pushing vaccines despite the risks

Fact: Government is committed to saving lives and livelihoods. The fastest way to return to our way of life is through ensuring that the majority of the population are protected from the virus. Vaccines are the simplest and most effective way to do this.

Myth: 5G networks cause the coronavirus through radiation emissions

Fact: The World Health Organisation has made it clear that viruses cannot travel on radio waves and mobile networks. COVID-19 is spreading in many countries that do not have 5G mobile networks.

Myth: The Vaccines have the mark of the Beast – 666

Fact: Vaccines have no connection with any religious organisations and cannot be infused with spirits, demons or other abstract ingredients. They are purely a product of science. There is no conspiracy to possess, bewitch or control anybody through vaccines

Myth: Vaccines are a way for our former oppressors to oppress us again

Fact: Government would never allow a situation where any country or nation would be allowed to oppress our people through any means. Scientists and governments all over the world, including our own, have all contributed to the knowledge that has led to the development of the vaccines. It has not just been the work of Western and rich countries but a global collaboration.

COVID 19 VACCINE MYTHS VS FACTS

Here are some of the facts for the myths that are circulating about COVID 19 vaccines as the country rolls out vaccines as an additional prevention measure

MYTH	FACT
COVID 19 vaccines were rushed and are not safe	Researchers took no safety shortcuts to come up with a vaccine. Large studies have shown that the vaccines are safe and effective. The government also has strong policies and structures for routinely monitoring the safety of all vaccines used in the country
The COVID 19 vaccine will alter my DNA	It's impossible for a vaccine to change or alter your DNA
I do not have to wear a mask or practice social distancing once I am vaccinated	The vaccine helps to prevent you from getting sick with COVID 19, but it is currently not known if it prevents you from transmitting the virus to others. Stopping the pandemic requires using all the tools available like wearing a mask, washing your hands and social distancing
I do not need to get vaccinated I already had COVID 19	Currently experts do not know how long someone is protected from getting sick again after recovering from COVID 19, and reinfection is possible. Also we won't know how long immunity produced by vaccination lasts until we have more data on how well the vaccines work
The government will track me through the vaccine	There are no tracking devices or microchips in the vaccines
I will test positive for COVID 19 after receiving the vaccine	COVID 19 vaccines will not cause you to test positive for COVID 19
COVID 19 vaccines give you the virus	COVID 19 vaccines do not give you the virus. The vaccine does not contain a live virus strain

I still have questions about vaccination. What should I do?

If you have questions about vaccines be sure to talk to your healthcare worker. He or she can provide you with science-based advice about vaccination for you and your family, including the recommended vaccination schedule in your country.

We encourage you to rely on reputable and authoritative information sources, such as health care providers and public health officials, WHO and UNICEF to make informed choices and stay up to date. You can also use the following Ministry of Health and Child Care platforms to get more information:

Whatsapp hub Send Hi to +263 714 734 593

Toll free hotline Dial 2019 or 393

Ministry of Health and Child Care website, Twitter handle, Facebook page

NB: This document will continue to be updated with new information as necessary

With a fast-moving pandemic, no one is safe, until everyone is safe!