What You Need to Do Before and After Your Vaccine

Now that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for kids ages 5 to 11, what’s the best way to prepare my child?

Prepare your child as you would for any vaccine. Have an age-appropriate talk discussing that the shot may hurt for a moment, but it will help their body fight off illness and keep them safer. Therefore, they will be better able to enjoy friends, school, and time with grandma. If your child is old enough to understand, you can explain that they may feel unwell for a short time, but it’s completely normal and their body’s way of becoming stronger against the virus. Follow the same advice for an adult and treat side effect symptoms with rest, fluids, etc.

Does it matter which vaccine I get?

When vaccine availability was limited, health experts urged everyone to get the first-available shot. Now that vaccines are widely available, it is your choice which of the three to get. So far, data shows that the Moderna or Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is the most effective against the virus. However, the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) vaccine is only slightly less effective, and some people find it more convenient because it requires just one shot. Pfizer is currently the only approved vaccine for children.

If you’re getting your booster, is it better to mix and match brands, i.e., get a Moderna booster if your initial doses were Pfizer or vice versa?

If you got Moderna or Pfizer first, it does not matter which booster you get.
However, a small study by the National Institutes of Health showed a better immune response in people who remained consistent between their first vaccine and booster. The study also suggested that people who received the J&J shot got a better immune response from a Moderna or Pfizer booster.

**What are the most common vaccine side effects?**

Most people feel a bit tired and achy, and some experience pain and redness or a skin rash at the injection site for about 24 to 48 hours. Very rarely, this may last as long as a week. Depending on your sensitivity, you may also experience fever, chills, headache, or nausea. This is part of your body’s immune response and typically shows up within a day or two after vaccination. Contact your doctor if you have difficulty breathing, a high fever, body aches, and fatigue.

**Can you minimize side effects and make the vaccine more effective by drinking a big glass of water before getting vaccinated?**

There’s no evidence to back up this claim. However, staying hydrated is always a good idea because it helps your body function better. Drink as much as you usually do (hopefully eight glasses of water per day). You should avoid getting your vaccine if you’re dehydrated – you’re more likely to feel faint or ill. It is helpful to drink extra fluids after getting vaccinated, especially if you feel unwell or run a fever. Fluids help your body regulate temperature. Just make sure you’re consuming water instead of soda, caffeine, or alcohol, which are dehydrating beverages.

Another way to feel better sooner is to rest after being vaccinated, just as you would if you were fighting off the cold or flu. Feeling crummy in the short term means your immune system is functioning, and it’s a small price to pay for COVID-19 protection.
Does it matter which arm you get the shot in?

Some people think that getting vaccinated in your dominant arm – the one you use the most often – increases vaccine efficacy. There is no evidence supporting this theory, but you may want to get vaccinated in your non-dominant arm if you experience soreness. And if you’re a side sleeper, choose the arm you don’t typically sleep on.

Can you take a pain reliever, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, or an antihistamine before your shot?

Vaccine guidelines recommend against this because it’s still not known how these medicines affect vaccine efficacy. Studies have shown that ibuprofen and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAIDs) drugs can slow down antibody production. If you want to take ibuprofen or acetaminophen after your shot, wait an hour. If your arm is sore, apply a cool, damp cloth or ice and move your arm around to increase blood flow to the area. That may ease the pain temporarily.

Will applying topical pain relief to the injection site help?

Applying over-the-counter lidocaine cream to the injection site area 30 to 60 minutes before your shot may help relieve some of the pain during and directly after you receive the vaccine.

Are there any prescription medications people should avoid on the day of their vaccination?

Clinical trials of the vaccine were performed on people with common diseases such as asthma, high blood pressure, and diabetes. So, in those cases, it should be fine to take your prescription medicine. People with other chronic conditions such as cancer, rheumatoid arthritis or immunosuppression, should also continue taking
their medication. Steroid injections, unless taken for a chronic condition, should be avoided too close to COVID-19 vaccinations.

On another note, you should wait four to six weeks after getting your shot before getting a mammogram. The reason for this is that the vaccine may inflame or swell the lymph nodes. It’s your body’s way of creating a healthy immune response to the vaccine but might confuse the radiologist reviewing your mammogram.

The bottom line: If you have any questions or concerns, speak to your doctor first.

**Is it okay to get the flu vaccine at the same time as your COVID-19 booster shot?**

Yes. The potential side effects from the COVID booster and flu vaccine are the same, whether you get them separately or simultaneously. People who are sensitive to vaccines may wish to schedule shots a week or two apart. They should also remain at the pharmacy or doctor’s office where they get their vaccination longer than the recommended 15 minutes in case they have a reaction.

**Speaking of vaccine sensitivity, are there groups of people with certain health conditions who should not get the COVID-19 vaccine?**

People with neurological conditions such as Guillain-Barre syndrome should discuss with their health care provider whether to avoid the vaccine. If you had an allergic reaction to your first vaccination that was severe enough to require treatment with an EpiPen or medical attention, do not get a second dose or booster. If you’re allergic to any of the vaccine ingredients, don’t get the shot. The CDC website has a list of vaccine ingredients. If you have any hesitancy or concern regarding sensitivity you should discuss with your health care provider.
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