**All you need to know about vaccination in the time of COVID-19**

*Produced in cooperation with WHO and EUvsDisinfo*

1. **What are the benefits of being vaccinated?**

Today, there are vaccines to protect against at least 20 diseases, such as diphtheria, tetanus, influenza and measles. Together, these **vaccines save the lives of up to 3 million people every year** – that’s **more than five lives every minute**, helping people to grow up and grow old in good health.

Vaccinations are an integral part of the panoply of healthcare that has vastly extended the length and quality of our lives in the past hundred years. Most of us received several vaccines as children, protecting us against diseases that just a few generations ago killed and crippled thousands. And our elderly and vulnerable populations are vaccinated every year to protect them against annual strains of influenza. We know that vaccinated children do better at school, and their communities benefit economically. Vaccines advance global welfare and are among the most cost-effective means of doing so.

There are now several vaccines that are in use against **COVID-19**, and several hundred million vaccine doses have already been administered. These vaccines protect against the disease and its consequences by developing an immune response to the virus.

Getting vaccinated will also help **protect people around you**, because if you are protected from developing severe COVID-19 disease through vaccination, you are less likely to infect someone else – someone like your elderly parents or grandparents, who are at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19, or the doctors and nurses on whom we all depend. Exactly how well vaccination will prevent onward transmission is not yet known, however, so it is important to also continue with other prevention measures, like wearing a mask, until everyone around you is also vaccinated.

1. **Are all COVID-19 vaccines safe?**

All vaccines authorised in the EU to prevent COVID-19 undergo a scientific evaluation by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and are **rigorously monitored to ensure safety**. The WHO is working together with the EU and around the world to ensure that the highest safety standards are met for authorised vaccines.

The EMA has so far **approved four vaccines** for use in the European Union – those produced by **Pfizer-BioNTech**, **AstraZeneca**, **Moderna**, and **Johnson & Johnson**. Three others are currently under review, including the **Russian Sputnik** vaccine.

Like all vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines have gone through a **rigorous, multi-stage testing process**, including large trials that involve tens of thousands of people. These trials are specifically designed to identify any common side effects or other safety concerns.

It’s true that COVID-19 vaccines have been developed and approved at record speeds, but there has been **no compromise on safety** – on the contrary, the unprecedented international cooperation and vast amounts of funding have enabled huge clinical trials in real life conditions that usually take much longer to achieve, if feasible at all.

Once a COVID-19 vaccine is introduced, WHO supports work with vaccine manufacturers, health officials in each country, and other partners, to monitor any safety concerns on an ongoing basis.

As with all medicines, side effects can occur after getting a COVID-19 vaccine, and are usually a sign that the vaccine is working by stimulating the immune system to prepare the body to fight the disease. However, these side effects are transient (24-48 hours), and serious side effects (such as an allergic reaction) are exceedingly rare. The fact is: **the risk of the disease by far outweighs the risks of the COVID-19 vaccines**.

You can review COVID-19 vaccines under investigation, evaluation and authorised for use in the EU on the [EMA website](https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/human-regulatory/overview/public-health-threats/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/treatments-vaccines-covid-19) or find out the latest [on the safety of COVID-19 vaccines](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/covid-19-vaccines) from the WHO.

1. **How are the EU and WHO helping with vaccination?**

The European Union last year spent **more than €1 billion to support the research and development of vaccines** and new therapies to cure COVID-19. The **new mRNA technology**, which has been vital for the rapid development of several vaccines, has been developed in Europe. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in particular has had strong financial support from the EU (BioNTech has received more than €9 million of EU research funding over the past decade, as well as a €100 million loan from the European Investment Bank in 2020).

Through its advance purchase agreements, the **EU has ordered 1.3 billion vaccine doses** from BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson – significantly more than what it needs to vaccinate its population of 447 million people. The EU intends to **share part of these vaccines with its partner countries** in parallel to accelerating the EU’s own vaccination plans.

At the same time, the European Union is one of the biggest supporters of [COVAX](https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax), a ground-breaking **global collaboration** to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. The EU’s [Team Europe](https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east-south/stay-informed/news/coronavirus-european-union-launches-team-europe-package-support) (which combines resources from the EU, its Member States and European financial institutions) supports COVAX with more than €2.2 billion, including €1 billion from the EU budget. This is a key contribution that is helping COVAX to secure 1.3 billion doses of vaccines for 92 low and middle-income countries, including its Eastern Partners, by the end of 2021.

COVAX has so far published the following [allocations](https://www.gavi.org/sites/default/files/covid/covax/COVAX-First-round-allocation-of-AZ-and-SII.pdf) of vaccines for the Eastern Partner countries for the period February to May 2021:

* **Armenia**: 124,800 doses of AstraZeneca
* **Azerbaijan**: 432,000 doses of AstraZeneca
* **Georgia**: 129,600 doses of AstraZeneca and 29,250 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech
* **Moldova**: 108,000 doses of AstraZeneca and 24,570 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech
* **Ukraine**: 1,776,000 doses of AstraZeneca and 117,000 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech

The first COVID-19 vaccines under the COVAX facility have already arrived in [Armenia](https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/armenia-receives-first-batch-covid-19-vaccines-through-covax-facility), [Georgia](https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/first-covid-19-vaccines-arrive-georgia-covax-facility), [Azerbaijan](https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/azerbaijan-receives-first-batch-vaccines-eu-supported-covax-facility), [Ukraine](https://euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/eu-supported-covax-delivers-117000-doses-pfizerbiontech-covid-19-vaccine) and [Moldova](https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/covax-new-shipment-vaccines-arrives-moldova). Romania has also shipped [vaccines to Moldova](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_901) through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

But the vaccines themselves are only half the story. Equally important is the **vaccine infrastructure**. Since February 2021, the EU and the WHO have been working together in a major effort to support the deployment of COVID-19 vaccines and vaccination in the six Eastern partner countries. With a total budget of €40 million over three years, this is the largest EU and WHO joint action ever implemented in the European Region.

Through this [programme](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/vaccination-eastern-partnership-countries_en.pdf), the EU and WHO are **helping to prepare national infrastructures** for the effective receipt and deployment of vaccines. The joint effort includes risk communication and community engagement, support to vaccine supply chain management, vaccination data and safety monitoring, training of health managers and medical staff involved in the vaccination campaign, scheduling of the vaccinations, as well as key logistical support for the delivery and handling of the vaccines and supplies.

1. **Will the COVID-19 vaccine provide long-term protection? When will this all be over?**

Because COVID-19 vaccines have only been developed and deployed over just the past year, it’s too early to know exactly how long their protection will last. Data from early studies show that immunity persists for several months but the full duration is not yet known, so continued monitoring will be needed.

If immunity against coronavirus does not last, then it may be necessary to have a vaccine every year, just as we do with the flu vaccine.

As for the impact of COVID-19 vaccines on the pandemic, this will depend on several factors, such as how quickly they are delivered, how many people get vaccinated, and the possible development of new variants of the disease.

To safely achieve **herd immunity** against COVID-19, a substantial proportion of a population will need to be vaccinated, lowering the overall opportunities for the virus able to spread in the whole population. The percentage of people who need to be immune, either through prior infection or vaccination, in order to achieve herd immunity varies with each disease (e.g. 95% for measles and around 80% for polio). The proportion of the population that must be vaccinated against COVID-19 to begin inducing herd immunity is not known.

It is also not yet known how well vaccination will prevent transmission of the virus to others who may not be protected.

Therefore, until vaccination is widely available, we have to **continue following public health measures** – social distancing, wearing masks in public and good hand-washing hygiene – as these play an important role in breaking the virus transmission chain.

1. **Many of my friends and relatives think it’s all a conspiracy and are suspicious of the vaccine: how can I change their minds?**

It could be a a friend, a loved-one, a colleague or a neighbour. We all know someone who is strongly opposed to vaccination. Often, this fear is driven by belief in **anti-vaccine conspiracies**, like the untrue but persistent myths that Microsoft is using vaccines to microchip humanity or that vaccines can modify our DNA.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 health crisis has provided **ample opportunities** for the spread of mis- and disinformation, not just in the Eastern partner countries, but **all over the world**, including in the European Union and the United States.

Whether deliberately spread to divide people, or driven by genuine concern, false information and conspiracy theories exploit our fears and contribute to existing vaccine hesitancy.

People may be exposed to misinformation through the media or opinions and rumours spread in person. But increasingly, it is online **social networks** which fuel the infodemic. By amplifying attention-grabbing posts, **social media algorithms** actually incentivise the circulation of misinformation and disinformation, allowing false information to spread faster and further than true information.

In the Eastern Partnership region, one of the **key disinformation narratives** revolves around the claim that vaccines developed in the West are dangerous. The [**EUvsDisinfo**](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/) campaign, the EU’s leading initiative to counter disinformation, is [continuously monitoring](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=106935&date=&per_page=) and analysing the spread and impact of vaccine disinformation in the EaP countries, [debunking myths](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-battle-for-shoulders-which-vaccine-should-be-injected/) around the narrative that feeds the vaccine war between Russia and the West.

The EUvsDisinfo initiative has compiled a [**six-point guide**](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/my-loved-one-thinks-bill-gates-will-microchip-humanity-now-what/) for conversations with vaccine-sceptics to help you along the way with that friend or relative who is distrustful of vaccination. The guide urges you to **stay calm**, **understand**, **relate**, connect with **reliable sources**, encourage **critical thinking**, and… **know when to stop**.

1. **There’s still a way to go on vaccination, so what other support is available in times of COVID-19?**

The European Union has been in the frontline of COVID-19 support from the moment the pandemic struck. To date, **more than €1 billion worth of support** has been allocated in **emergency relief** to cover immediate needs, or for **assisting national health systems** and the **social and economic recovery** of the region.

The EU and the World Health Organization are working together, not only on vaccine supply, but to **support the health sector** across the six Eastern partner countries through the [Solidarity for Health Initiative](https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/projects/european-union-solidarity-health-initiative-eastern-partnership), supplying medical devices and personal equipment. Over 11 million items of personal protective equipment, 12,000 lab kits, over 1,500 ventilators, oxygen concentrators and pulse oximeters, and over 20,000 PCR testing kits have been provided as part of this project.

The EU is also supporting the **most vulnerable groups** in society, with investments of more than €11 million. Grants of up to €60,000 are given to civil society organisations through the [Eastern Partnership Solidarity Programme](https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/projects/eastern-partnership-covid-19-solidarity-programme) for projects such as supporting local schools with distance learning, helping women who have lost their jobs, or providing food supplies to the elderly and the disabled. A second programme, [COVID-19: Civil Society Resilience and Sustainability](https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/projects/covid-19-civil-society-resilience-and-sustainability), also works with civil society and independent media, helping them to continue providing access to protection and assistance, especially to the most vulnerable groups, as well as accurate information about the pandemic.

The EU is also **helping business to survive** this exceptionally difficult time, working closely with financing institutions in the EU Member States and globally to support small business, the self-employed and others across the region to easily access local currency loans and apply for grants to boost their businesses during and after the crisis, channelling support through the [EU4Business initiative](https://eu4business.eu/). You can visit the dedicated COVID-19 support pages on the EU4Business website to find out about support measures for businesses in [Armenia](https://covid-19-armenia.eu4business.eu/en/), [Azerbaijan](https://covid-19-azerbaijan.eu4business.eu/en/), [Belarus](https://covid-19-belarus.eu4business.eu/en/), [Georgia](https://covid-19-georgia.eu4business.eu/en/), [Moldova](https://covid-19-moldova.eu4business.eu/) and [Ukraine](https://covid-19-ukraine.eu4business.eu/en/).

European financial institutions, such as the [European Investment Bank](https://www.eib.org/en/about/initiatives/covid-19-response/index.htm) and the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/coronavirus/coronavirus-policy-response), have been key players in supporting business credit, but they have also invested billions in supporting public health systems, building economic resilience, digitalisation, renewable energies and green investments, providing both **emergency support** and longer-term investment to help build a **sustainable recovery**.