Facts on the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine

What is the new guidance for the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine?
The CDC’s immunization advisory committee voted 15-0 on Friday December 17, 2021, to amend guidance for the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) COVID-19 vaccine. The CDC now recommends the use of mRNA (Pfizer or Moderna) COVID-19 vaccines and boosters over the use of the J&J COVID-19 vaccine and booster in all individuals 18 years and older for the prevention of COVID-19.

Why did the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine guidance change?
The FDA and CDC updated guidance regarding the J&J COVID-19 vaccine on December 17, 2021, after reviewing data on the increased risk of Thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) following the administration of a J&J COVID-19 vaccine in individuals 18 years and older.

What is TTS?
TTS is a serious, but rare, adverse event that causes blood clots with low platelets. As of December 8, 2021, more than 16.9 million doses of the J&J COVID-19 vaccine have been given in the United States. The CDC and FDA identified 57 confirmed reports of people who got the J&J COVID-19 vaccine and later developed TTS. VAERS reports have identified nine deaths that have been caused by or were directly attributed to TTS following J&J COVID-19 vaccination.

I want the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, can I still get it?
Yes. The COVID-19 vaccine that an individual receives is a decision left to be made by each individual and their health care provider. However, mRNA vaccines are strongly recommended over the use of the J&J COVID-19 vaccines for the prevention of COVID-19. The CDC and North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) strongly prefer the use of mRNA vaccines unless an individual has a contraindication to mRNA COVID-19 vaccines (e.g., severe allergic reaction after a previous dose or to a component of an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine), if a person would otherwise remain unvaccinated for COVID-19 due to limited access to mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, or when a person wants to receive the J&J COVID-19 vaccine despite the safety concerns identified.

I received a Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine and I am worried about TTS, what should I do?
TTS is a very rare, but serious, side effect associated with the J&J vaccine. Seek medical help immediately if you have any of these symptoms within 3 weeks of receiving the J&J COVID-19 vaccine:
- Severe or persistent headaches or blurred vision
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Leg swelling
- Persistent abdominal pain
- Easy bruising or tiny blood spots under the skin near the injection site

Does this change in guidance mean that COVID-19 vaccines are unsafe?
No. FDA approved or authorized COVID-19 vaccines available in the United States are safe and effective at preventing COVID-19 illness, hospitalization, and death. However, the updated guidance for the J&J COVID-19 vaccine proves that the safety monitoring systems in place, such as VAERS and V-Safe, are working to alert officials of risks associated with COVID-19 vaccines as they arise. Millions of Americans have and continue to receive COVID-19 vaccines under the most intense safety monitoring efforts in US history.

When did this vaccine become available in North Dakota?
The FDA issued an emergency use authorization (EUA) for Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine for use in people 18 years and older on February 27, 2021. In March 2021, North Dakota received its first allocation of J&J vaccine.

What type of vaccine is it?
The J&J COVID-19 vaccine is a non-replicating viral vector vaccine. This differs from the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, which are both mRNA vaccines.

How does this vaccine work?

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This vaccine works by using a viral vector, a harmless virus called adenovirus 26, which has been modified to include a gene that codes for the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein. Once the viral vector enters the human cell, it produces the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein and that triggers an immune response in our bodies. J&J used this same approach to make an Ebola vaccine that has been authorized for use by the European Medicines Agency.

How many doses does it require?
The J&J COVID-19 vaccine requires one dose. This differs from the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines that both require two doses to complete the series.

What is the effectiveness of this vaccine?
Clinical trial data indicated that this vaccine is 66% effective at preventing moderate to severe COVID-19 and 85% effective at preventing severe disease 28 days after vaccination. Real world data has shown that J&J provides strong protection against variants (like Delta), reducing the risk for COVID-19 associated hospitalization by 71%.

I’m immunocompromised and received a J&J vaccine, can I receive an additional dose?
At this time there is not enough data to determine whether immunocompromised people who received the J&J COVID-19 vaccine also have an improved antibody response following an additional dose. The FDA and CDC are actively working to provide guidance on this issue.

If I received a J&J vaccine, do I need a booster?
Yes, all individuals 18 years and older who received a single dose of the J&J COVID-19 vaccine should receive a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose at least 2 months after completing their primary vaccine series.

Which vaccine should I get for my booster dose?
The CDC recommends that individuals who received an initial dose of J&J COVID-19 vaccine should receive either a Pfizer or Moderna (mRNA) vaccine as their COVID-19 booster dose at least 2 months following their initial J&J dose. However, the CDC does allow for a “mix and match” approach to booster doses for all three available COVID-19 vaccines in the US. It is up to the health care provider and the patient to determine which COVID-19 vaccine brand is the best option for a booster dose. More information can be found on the NDDoH’s booster dose FAQ. All persons who elect to receive a J&J COVID-19 vaccine booster should be informed about the risk and symptoms of TTS that could occur after vaccination.

What are the side effects from this vaccine?
Most common side effects reported were pain at the injection site, headache, fatigue, muscle aches and nausea. J&J vaccine has been linked to two potentially serious but extremely rare adverse events: blood clots with low platelets (also known as TTS) and Guillain-Barre Syndrome.

Were different races and ethnicities included in the J&J clinical trials?
J&J is reporting that 26% of its participants in the U.S. and 31% of its participants globally are from diverse backgrounds.

Were fetal cells used to create the vaccine?
The J&J vaccine did require the use of fetal cell cultures to develop and manufacture the vaccine. The Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission have both stated that receiving a COVID-19 vaccine that required fetal cell lines is morally acceptable. However, if an individual can choose among the available vaccines, the Catholic Church has stated that Pfizer’s and Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccines are preferable to J&J’s COVID-19 vaccine.

How can I find COVID-19 vaccine in my area?
To see where COVID-19 vaccine is available in your area, check out the NDDoH website.

I still have questions, who can I speak to?
To contact the NDDoH Division of Immunizations, call 701-328-3386 or toll-free 1-800-472-2180.