

COVID-19 VACCINE ROLL OUT

Australia's first COVID-19 vaccine has been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

On Monday the 25th of January, the TGA, responsible for checking the safety of drugs used in Australia, approved the Pfizer vaccine for Australians who are 16 years and older.

It requires two doses, at least 21 days apart.

The Federal Government has said it is confident the Pfizer vaccine will arrive and be rolled out by late February despite reported shortages of the Pfizer vaccine overseas.

Your union United Workers Union (UWU) will keep you up to date with the latest information and will attempt to address concerns as they arise.

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WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO RECEIVE THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

COVID-19 vaccines will be free for all Australian citizens, permanent residents, and most visa-holders as per the *Australian COVID-19 Vaccination Policy*. Those on visitor visas, electronic travel authority, eVisitor and Transit visas are currently excluded.

WHO WILL HAVE PRIORITY TO GET THE VACCINE?

Phase 1a:

- ▶ Frontline health care worker subgroups (including ambulance subgroups)
- ▶ Aged care and disability care workers
- ▶ Aged care and disability care residents
- ▶ Quarantine and border workers

Phase 1b:

- ▶ Other health care workers
- ▶ Elderly adults aged 70 and over
- ▶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged over 55
- ▶ People with an underlying medical condition, including those with a disability
- ▶ Critical and high-risk workers include defence, police, fire, emergency services and meat processing

** There is ongoing discussions around where school staff and early childhood educators will sit but it will be before Phase 2b.*

Phase 2a:

- ▶ Adults aged 50-69
- ▶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18-54
- ▶ Other critical and high-risk workers

Phase 2b:

- ▶ All other adults in population

Phase 3:

- ▶ People under 18 (only if recommended)

UWU believes the phases will be happening relatively quickly. [Click here](#) for more information on the Australian Government's COVID-19 vaccine national roll-out strategy.

DO I HAVE TO GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

No, it is not mandatory to get the vaccine at present. This may change in the future, according to health advice and we will keep members informed about this.

The Federal Government, after advice from health professionals, has chosen at this stage not to make the vaccine mandatory in priority industries such as aged care. However, the Federal Government is actively encouraging a high level of vaccinations, stating Australia is a "vaccination nation" with one of the highest levels of vaccinations in the world.

UWU takes the view that employers should consult with their workers about any issues related to the vaccine. Any rules about the vaccine should be consistent with the spirit and the letter of the advice from the Federal Government's health professionals.

If your employer tells you that getting a vaccine is compulsory, or requires you to produce evidence you've had the vaccine, or gives preferential treatment to people who have had the vaccine, the best step to take is to contact your Union for advice.

WHAT IS THE UNITED WORKERS UNION POSITION ON MANDATORY VACCINATIONS?

Your union has always supported Australia's vaccination program based on advice provided by Australian health professionals and we will continue to listen to the advice of health professionals as the experts through this process. A COVID-19 vaccine will help protect the lives of vulnerable Australians.

If a decision to make the vaccine mandatory requirement for employment, advice would come from The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee and the Chief Medical Officer. Then a national cabinet decision put in place at state level.

UWU will be carefully reviewing any state directives regarding mandatory vaccinations if and when this information is made publicly available, recognising that it is important to balance the health and safety of the community with an individual's personal choices about immunisation.

WHAT CONSULTATION IS TAKING PLACE?

Some members have questions and concerns about COVID-19 vaccines, because of a lack of information about the Australian vaccine approvals process. Your union believes you should have this information before any vaccine is rolled out.

UWU members need to be provided with as much accurate information as possible so you're able to give informed consent, so your union has been actively engaging with the Federal Government and Health Department.

At an initial meeting with the Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt on 13 January 2021, UWU, along with the Australian Nurses and Midwifery Federation and other health unions identified many questions about the approval process, the efficacy of the vaccine, and of the roll out that we require answers to.

Since then, your union has had a detailed technical briefing with the Chief Medical Officer.

Members have enquired about whether individual employers are able to require their staff to take the vaccine.

UWU takes the view that employers should consult with their workers about any issues related to the vaccine. We are writing to all employers nationally to remind them that if they are considering forcing workers to have the vaccine, they need to consult with their workers through their union before any such decision is taken. With any rules about the vaccine to be consistent with the spirit and the letter of the advice from the Federal Government's health professionals

ARE THERE SIDE EFFECTS?

The acting Chief Medical Officer, Michael Kidd, has said that overseas the side-effects of the vaccine had been similar to those of other vaccines, including soreness around the injection site and some tiredness. Allergic reactions have been extremely rare and have been people who have had previous reactions to vaccines.

More details about possible side effects are available at the Federal Department of Health's FAQ's page [HERE](#).

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON PREGNANT WOMEN?

As outlined in the [Department of Health's Frequently Asked Questions](#), the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) is preparing advice for health care professionals about the use of the vaccine, with the advice expected shortly. The advice will cover the use of the vaccine for breastfeeding women, pregnant women, and frail elderly.

WHAT IF MY EMPLOYER THREATENS TO TERMINATE MY EMPLOYMENT IF I REFUSE TO GET THE VACCINE?

If your employer terminates your employment (or threatens to terminate your employment) because you have indicated you will not get the COVID-19 vaccine, you should contact your union for assistance immediately, as strict time limits for legal options can apply. At this stage, the COVID-19 vaccine is not mandatory. However, employees do have a responsibility to follow lawful and reasonable directions given by their employer, which may include getting the COVID-19 vaccine should it become mandatory.

What is considered reasonable will depend on your individual circumstances and the nature of your work. If you are unable to receive the COVID-19 vaccine due to medical reasons your employer has an obligation to discuss possible alternative duties and working arrangements that you may be able to perform while still ensuring the safety of yourself and others.

This may include redeployment to another area or providing additional personal protective equipment for infection prevention and control. It may be illegal for your employer to summarily terminate your employment for refusing to receive the COVID-19 vaccine without first discussing the matter with you and exploring alternative options. If you are directed by your employer to receive the vaccine and are unable to get it or you have concerns about doing so, you should raise these with your employer and contact the union for further assistance.

WHAT IF I CANNOT GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE DUE TO MEDICAL REASONS?

At this stage, the COVID-19 vaccine is not mandatory. However, should this change in the future and you cannot get the COVID-19 vaccine because of genuine medical reasons you should advise your employer of this.

Employers are required to undertake a risk assessment for their staff regarding COVID-19 vulnerabilities and address the risks. This may include making alternative work available or proposing safer work arrangements, such as undertaking training or working from home.

Therefore, if you are unable to have the COVID-19 vaccine due to medical reasons (ie: you are allergic), your employer will need to develop and implement strategies so far as reasonably practicable for you to continue to work, while enhancing the safety of you and the people you work with.

This may include providing you with additional personal protective equipment for infection prevention and control or deploying you to another area that poses a lower risk of infection. In looking for alternative work, the employer does not have to create a special position for each person.

If you need further assistance, contact your union.

HOW AND WHEN WILL THE COVID-19 VACCINE BE ROLLED OUT?

A COVID-19 vaccine is expected to start rolling out to priority groups (which includes frontline health care workers, as stated above) from late February 2021, after the successful approval of the Pfizer vaccine by the TGA.

Things are still being finalised but at this stage it seems the vaccines will be available through GP clinics, dedicated vaccination clinics, workplace vaccinations, in-reach vaccination teams, and more.

In the first instance front-line health workers will be offered the Pfizer vaccination through 30-to-50 hubs established at major hospitals nationally. For example, UWU understands that six major vaccination hubs will be established in large hospitals across Queensland to assist with demand.

In line with the rollout plan, aged care staff and residents will be offered the vaccination on-site at residential aged care facilities, with doses distributed from the hubs. Doses of the vaccine will initially be allocated to States and Territories based on the number of people in the above priority groups. For up-to-date information, please check the Department of Health website.

WHO WILL ADMINISTER THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

Registered nurses working in vaccination areas will primarily be responsible for administering the COVID-19 vaccine. However, GPs and ultimately pharmacists are being asked to assist with administering the vaccine, provided their workplace is appropriately set up to store and administer it.

HOW WILL I KNOW THE COVID-19 VACCINE IS SAFE?

To be approved for use in Australia, any vaccine must pass the TGA's rigorous assessment and approval process. This includes assessment of its safety, quality and effectiveness. COVID-19 vaccines need to pass all test phases required by the TGA, like any other vaccine. This includes pre-clinical and clinical trials, which involves strict trials in thousands of people across multiple countries. Before any vaccine can be approved for use, the clinical trials must provide scientific evidence that shows the benefits of a vaccine greatly outweigh any risks.

The TGA's approval means the vaccine can now be legally supplied in Australia. As part of the approval, the TGA said it would continue to actively monitor the safety of the Pfizer vaccine in Australia and overseas and will not hesitate to take action if safety concerns are identified. As an added safety check, the TGA said its laboratories would assess each batch of vaccines before the vaccine can be supplied in Australia.

THE COVID-19 VACCINE WAS PRODUCED IN RECORD TIME – DOES THIS MEAN IT COULD BE UNSAFE?

The development and roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines overseas have indeed taken less time than would normally be associated with a new vaccine.

However, there are several reasons for this:

- ▶ Early genomic sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 and global information sharing allowed scientists a “head start” on developing potential vaccines, instead of requiring lengthy processes to individually de-code the virus.
- ▶ Scientists had the benefit of being familiar with SARS-CoV-1 and could therefore use the information learned from SARS-CoV-1 to inform their vaccine development for SARS-CoV-2. For the Pfizer vaccine, manufacturing of the vaccine occurred simultaneously with testing and clinical trials, due to the urgency of the pandemic. This meant that when testing and review was completed and approved, there were already large stocks of the vaccine available to be distributed. Had the prospective vaccine failed clinical trials, all vials of the prospective vaccine would have been destroyed.
- ▶ There have been unprecedented amounts of public funding poured into the development of a COVID-19 vaccine. Vaccines are usually funded in “blocks” according to clinical trial stages, which delays the development process. For the COVID-19 vaccine, the funding received was so substantial that scientists were able to work continuously.
- ▶ The Australian Government Therapeutic Goods Administration's review process has been altered slightly to allow for the administrative processes to be streamlined for the COVID-19 vaccine. Only the administrative processes have been affected. In other words, the time required for review of clinical trials has not been affected.

HOW WILL THE COVID-19 VACCINE BE RECORDED?

All immunisation records in Australia are placed on the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR). The AIR is linked to your My Health Record (MyHR) account. It is possible to opt out of having a MyHR account at any time by logging into your account and changing your settings.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

You can find more information about COVID-19 vaccines on the Australian government website.